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Proto-Israelites: The Story of a Misleading Term

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“For in the beginning of literature there is myth,
as there is also in the end of it”

(J.L. Borges, *Parable of Cervantes and the Quixote*, 1955)

ABSTRACT: The prefix “proto”, originally from the Greek, carries several meanings, including first, earliest, original and primitive. A “prototype” is the first or original type, and “proto” may indicate something in the way of becoming. In this article we offer a critical review of the history and uses of the term “proto-Israelites” in biblical and archaeological studies since 1943. The prehistory of ‘early Israel’ has shrunk from the Early Bronze to the Iron Age, but the use of “proto-Israel” has grown since the 1990s, tied to issues of historicity and ethnicity. “Proto-Israelite” is a misleading term. It enables scholars to re-find a united, ethnic Israel, by projecting it onto the past in disguise, as “proto-Israel”. There are no “proto-people” that carry “proto-ethnicity”. The use of “proto-Israelites” serves modern ideologies. We suggest more neutral terms, which do not beg the question whether an Israelite ethnic community existed, or can be identified in material remains of the Iron Age I.

Key words: Archaeology of Israel, Ethnicity, Proto-Israel, Identity, Biblical Archaeology

1. Introduction

The prefix “proto”, originally from the Greek, carries several meanings in English, including first, earliest, original and primitive. A “prototype” is the first or original type, and “proto” may indicate something/somebody in the way of becoming. In Chemistry, it means the first in a series of chemical compounds or the parent compound. In Philology, it designates a reconstructed earlier stage of a language or script. Speakers of languages (and proto-languages) are people; but an assumed proto-language does not indicate the existence of proto-ethnicity.

In historical studies, the publication of *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) opened a discourse that reflected on how malleable the past was for inventing nationalist traditions in the nineteenth century (Geary 2002). It was during this period of modern Western history that peoplehood was conceived in evolutionary terms, unfolding through time. The reasoning was that if a people or nation exists in the present, there must have been a previous stage in which it was not still completely formed or self-conscious, yet already had its national/ethnic essence. But the subsequent deconstruction of national myths showed how unsound such creations had been. Biological and cultural features certainly may be traced back into the past; but the extremes of national continuums are created by the very historiographical processes that give that “ethnic” or “national” meaning to the data.

We do not argue for or against the possible existence of an ethnic group called Israel in the Iron I: it remains an open question. We argue against replacing this unknown with a misleading assurance. A few scholars have already criticised this term (Schloen 2002: 58; Davies 2015: 68), but they did not review its history and its use in relation to our times. Like “proto languages”, “proto-Israel” is a scholarly construction, which is discussed and argued about as if it reflects a reality. Our paper is concerned with the creation, function, use and misuse of this scholarly construction.

2. The Early History of the “Proto-Israelites”

Until the 1990s, the term “proto-Israelites” or “proto-Israel”, meaning the first Israelites, was rarely used. Various times were suggested for their appearance. Millar Burrows, in referring to Albright’s rejection of the “Bedouin” model for Israel’s origins, remarked that the “proto-Israelites” were not “destitute of cultural traditions” (Burrows 1943: 474). Moshe Greenberg interpreted Abraham as a *Ḥabiru*: originally the epithet *‘ibri* (Hebrew) marked his status, but later it “set the proto-Israelites off the surrounding Canaanites and Egyptians” (Greenberg 1955: 92; cf. Redford 1965). Similarly, D.N. Freedman and B.E. Willoughby wrote that “Hebrew”:

“Defined an ethnic group with no negative connotations. In a general sense the term was used by foreigners with reference to proto-Israelites or by the latter themselves as a self-designation over against foreigners. After the

founding of the Israelite state, the term *'ibri* [Hebrew] fell into disuse" (Freedman and Willoughby 1964: 431).¹

Albert de Pury referred to "proto-israélite" semi-nomadic clans in the Amarna period (de Pury 1969: 47), and Frank Moore Cross identified a "proto-Israelite league" in the days of Moses and the conquest (Cross 1973: 65, 71, 143), when Yahweh split from El. William H. Stiebing (1976) saw a "proto-Israelite" tradition in the story of the flood, while Kathleen Kenyon mentioned some groups of "proto-Israelites" who had no tradition of descent into Egypt (Kenyon 1978: 31).

Scholars also imagined a "proto-Aramean" origins for Israel, mainly because in the Bible the patriarchs were called Arameans (Deut. 26:5; Ezek. 16:3). The "proto" was necessary, because the periods considered (EBIV or MBII) preceded the historical appearance of the Arameans. De Pury (1978; cf. Scullion 1988: 143) tried to defend the historicity of the Patriarchs against the revisionist theses of Thomas L. Thompson (1974) and John Van Seters (1975). In his view, the biblical narratives preserve traditions going back to "proto-Israelite" groups. The issue was not ethnicity: the Patriarchs were not "foreigners", and ethnicity was not (yet) debated, but taken for granted and identified in language, kin, and material culture.

Norman Gottwald used "proto-Israelites", for example, concerning the building of Pithom and Rameses in Egypt (Exod. 1,11) (Gottwald 1979: 30). He recognized, though, that there was no "Patriarchal Period": it was not a "separate autonomous phase in the history of Israel", but only "a phase in the history of Yahwism" (Gottwald 1979: 40).² His "proto-Israelites" were interchangeable with "prototypical ancestors/fathers" (Gottwald 1979: 119-20). Ironically perhaps, some of Gottwald's "proto-Israelites" were early in time, but did not worship Yahweh, so were not (in his opinion) Israelites. Others were Israelites, but from a much later time, retrojected by the biblical authors into the past. "Proto-Israelites" included Canaanites, and could not be distinguished archaeologically from other groups (Gottwald 1979: 202-3).³

Frank A. Spina (1983: 322) used "proto-Israelites" for groups of *gerim* (sojourners), which included Hebrews (*'ibrim*), Canaanite peasants, and fugitive Sea Peoples. Presumably, they later coalesced into "Israelites". For Carol L. Meyers, the Menorah of the Tabernacle had "Mosaic origins":

"By Mosaic origins I am referring to the archaeological period of the Late Bronze II (or LB II), 1400 to 1200. This period includes the Exodus and Wilderness Wanderings, when proto-Israelite groups were coalescing into a national entity immediately after the Egyptian sojourn of at least a portion of them" (Meyers 1979: 48).

1. Alt referred to early Israelite ("frühisraelitischer/-en") documents (1953b: 371), time (1953a: 59; 1953b: 385), and beliefs (1953a: 354); but not to "proto-Israelites". Noth did refer in his writing to "Proto-Aramäer" (e.g., Noth 1961: 29, 31-33).

2. Compare with Gottwald 1993: 77: "proto-Israelite" is only "an analytic category".

3. For reviews see Wifall 1982; Merrill 1983; Lemche 1985: 295 n. 7. On the identity of the Canaanites in biblical literature and history see Lemche 1991.

The groups were an assumed “prototype”, which only later coalesced into “Israel”. One can hardly imagine “Mosaic people” as anything but Israelites, but did “Mosaic people” really lived in 1400-1200 BCE, outside the narratives?

Gradually, the EB and MB were given up, and “proto-Israelites” shifted to the end of the Late Bronze and Iron I periods (Hauer 1987; Kitchen 1991: 206; Shanks 1987; Dearman 1992; Kempinski 1992). Abraham Malamat tried to maintain a deeper history by defining two periods. A crystalized ethnic identity called Israel existed only from the Settlement in Palestine onward. Yet, Malamat still identified Israelites much earlier, in the Middle Bronze Age (“Patriarchal Period”), based on the assumed similarities between Israel and tribes in the Mari documents, like the Binu Yamina.⁴ Similarly, Johannes de Moor (1992) found direct links between Ugarit, Amurru, and “proto-Israelites”, which included Shasu, ‘Apiru, Amorites, and even Sea Peoples; but were “undifferentiated in many aspects” from the Canaanites.

Before the 1990s, the term “proto-Israelite” was rarely used by archaeologists. William G. Dever, who later advocated for this term, did not use it when interviewed in 1987 (Shanks 1987). Writing about Tel Masos, Dever doubted the ability to define “Israelites”:

“Tel Masos will be widely regarded by biblical historians as an ‘Early Israelite village.’ But how early? And if we cannot phase domestic structures correctly, how shall we recognize those material correlates that could in theory define ‘Israelite ethnicity?’” (Dever 1990: 91).

Israeli archaeologists had no doubts, using “Israel”, not “proto-Israel”. An example is Israel Finkelstein, who wrote about Israelites in “biblical” Shiloh (Finkelstein 1983). His *Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* from 1988 uses these terms often: “Israelite” (607 times), “Israelites” (77 times), and “Israel” (179 times) (including references).⁵

Aharon Kempinski preferred “Israelites” to “proto-Israelites”:

“This label [Israelites] may be as wrong or as misleading as every general name for larger ethnic groups like ‘Arameans’ or ‘Arabs’, not to speak about ‘Hellenes’, ‘Greeks’, ‘Latins’, etc. It is a truism that we adopted here a name which these people received mainly in a later period. But what should we call these tribes—‘(Proto-)Judeans/Israelites’, ‘(Proto-)Edomites’, ‘Epi Canaanites’? To my mind, every group, especially west of the Jordan, settling within the limits of the later Solomonic kingdom can be called ‘Israelites’” (Kempinski 1992: 2).

Ethnicity was becoming an issue. Kempinski’s “early Israelites” were a mixed lot, with “withdrawing Canaanites”, “segments of Aramaic tribal

4. Malamat 1981: 3-4; 2001: 3-4, 411 (first published in Malamat 1983), but see Lemche 1984.

5. Finkelstein (1988: 20) writes that de Geus (1975: 70) was “essentially erroneous” in claiming that archaeology had failed to make the Iron I Israelites visible as a new ethnic group. Ethnicity supposedly did not merit more discussion (Finkelstein 1988: 22)—yet it cropped up in his text, time and again.

groups”, etc. (cf. Killebrew 2005: 149-96). However, every ethnic group must have a specific name, otherwise it cannot be recognized by both members and outsiders (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6). The ethnic name is not a mere technical label. It is a signifier of essences, transmitting associations and prejudices. For example, “German” may imply reliable cars, Western, sauerkraut, Holocaust, good beer, always winning in football (or not), and so on. This is not a fixed trait-list of “ethnic markers”, which every German must exhibit, but a dynamic construction: it differs in time and between persons, both within and outside the group. If the name “Israel” was not yet an ethnic label, there could not be an ethnic group called “Israel”. Additionally, the historicity of the United Monarchy is not granted. Currently, a map drawn of Solomon’s kingdom is no longer a solid anchor for defining “proto-Israelites”—or any other people.

3. “Proto-Israelites”, Minimalism and Ethnicity

Two major changes occurred in the 1980s-1990s. The challenge of the Copenhagen School to the early historicity of the Bible forced Old Testament scholars to rethink how a history of early Israel can be reconstructed, if at all, and where does the biblical United Monarchy fit in (Lemche 1985; Ahlström 1986; Thompson 1992). It broke the assurance about “early Israel”, leading to efforts of re-forging a new assurance.

A second pivotal change concerned studies on nationalism and ethnicity. Following Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Homi Bhabha and others, we understand the nation as a relatively recent phenomenon, not an ancient, primordial entity (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1982; Hobsbawm 1990; Bhabha 1990; cf. Niesiołowski-Spanò 2016: 191-98). Thanks to Fredrik Barth, Anthony D. Smith and others, we define ethnicity as a dynamic construction, not a static phenomenon with “fixed” traits (language, material culture, etc.) (Barth 1969; Smith 1987; 1991). Formerly, archaeologists habitually identified “pots and people” (Childe 1929: v-vi). The expression “pots and people”, however, was hardly used before the 1980s.⁶ It became popular for criticizing former approaches after ethnicity was no longer a “given”.

Archaeologists faced a new problem: how to identify ethnicity from material remains? Some pioneering studies were optimistic (Kamp and Yoffee 1980; McGuire 1982); but scholars discovered gradually that there were no easy “ethnic markers”.⁷ Ancient documents seldom show ethnic awareness.

6. For early mentions see Kramer 1977; Johnson 1980: 85; Shanks and Tilley 1987: 81-84.

7. Hall 1997; Bahrani 2006; Kletter 2006; 2014. Jones (1997) tried to identify ethnicity in archaeology by using Bourdieu’s *habitus*. Her definition of ethnicity (“people who set themselves apart and/or are set apart by others with whom they interact or co-exist on the basis of their perception of culture differentiation and/or common descent”, Jones 1997: xii) is more radical than Smith’s. However, she never showed how one can deduce ethnicity from *habitus*, without prior historical data (cf. Kletter

For example, the Merenptah Stele from the late thirteenth century BCE indicates the recognition of Israelites by outsiders (in Smith's terms, "ethnic category"); but it does not prove an "ethnic community" or an "ethnos" (Chantrain 2019). Without historical sources, one cannot define archaeological "ethnic markers", because if ethnicity is not a "thing" but a dynamic construction, it is not tied to any list of material traits.

Marit Skjeggstad was the first to present the consequences of this criticism for "ancient Israel" (Skjeggstad 1992). Since then, the use of "proto-Israelites" occurs in a crucially different context. It is no longer a question of the first Israelites in time/place. The first Israelites must be *ethnic* Israelites, at a time when pots are no longer people. This makes the use of 'proto-Israelites' problematic. Having no evidence for ethnic "proto-Israelites", the term becomes a way of circumnavigating the ethnic issue (Pfoh 2021: 325-28). Scholars who use it project Israelite ethnicity into the past, based on the biblical narratives, not on "independent" archaeological sources. The result is a paradox, for if the Iron Age I Israelites were an ethnic community, there is no need to add the "proto" to their name.

Thus, the term "proto-Israelites" can no longer be used "simply"; it is embedded in the debates on historicity and ethnicity:

"In the quest for the ultimate origins of Israel in a historical and cultural sense—for what I propose to call the 'proto-Israelite' 'ethnic identity' and socioeconomic order—archaeology has now become our most exciting and indispensable tool. That is simply because of archaeology's unique advantage over the biblical text" (Dever 1991: 87).

We see here how "proto-Israelite" refers to ethnic identity. Dever complained that Finkelstein "has vigorously attacked my generally positivist view, even rejecting my cautious term 'proto-Israelite' for the hill country settlers" (Dever 2001: 71). Finkelstein replied that he debated some views, but accepted the term "proto-Israelites" (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 65). In fact, Finkelstein hardly used this term (cf. Finkelstein 1996; 2005: 18). In the article in which the term is supposedly accepted, it appears only once, in the affirmation of this acceptance! Elsewhere in the same article only Israelites are recognized (32 times) (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002).

In advocating for the existence of the "proto-Israelites", Dever also criticized Finkelstein for applying the ethnic term "Israelite" to Iron I 'Izbit Sartah (Dever 1991: 79). Finkelstein did so on the grounds of similarities in the material culture to other Iron I highland sites, including Shiloh, which was (according to the Bible) a central Israelite temple: "the population or its descendants considered itself Israelite when it crystallized in the hill country during the 11th century" (Finkelstein 1983: 202). Dever objected with good reasons: these are merely models, which "derive largely from biblical texts, not strictly on the basis of the archaeological record or of sociocultural theo-

2006: 577). On the pitfall of "ethnicizing" archaeological cultures on the basis of DNA see Maran (2022).

ries” (Dever 1991: 79). Such “appropriation” of biblical traditions is simplistic—‘Izbet Şartah could well be a “resettling of local, indigenous Canaanite elements of the population at the end of the Late Bronze Age” (Dever 1991: 79).

In confronting the Copenhagen school, however, Dever signalled ‘Izbet Şartah as a solid proof for “proto-Israel”:

“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 [...] 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: 23-24; and 1998: 47).

This reversal of opinions about ‘Izbet Şartah by Dever pales in comparison to the changes expressed by Finkelstein about Shiloh. At first, when he in the 1980s excavated “biblical Shiloh”, he found there remains of a central Israelite cultic site (Finkelstein 1983). In the 1990s, with biblical minimalism in the background and ethnicity as an “issue”, Finkelstein moved away from “biblical Shiloh”, reputedly, in favour of scientific archaeology:

“In the final report of the excavations I still toyed with the possibility that a regional shrine functioned at Shiloh in the Iron I [...] At that time, however; I was not yet fully liberated from a somewhat naïve reading of the biblical text. To be frank, if one treats the site according to rules of pre- or proto- historical archaeology, *nothing in the finds hints at such a regional shrine or a cult place at all*. The architecture is quite common, and so is the pottery. The size of the site and the settlement pattern around it are *unexceptional*, and there are almost no finds that can be directly associated with cult” (Finkelstein 2005: 19; emphasis added).

A decade later, Finkelstein returned to a “biblical Shiloh”:

“Recent excavations at Shiloh shed further, important light on the nature of the site in the Iron I. Additional Iron I buildings that were probably used for storage were unearthed close to the surface [...]. From the photographs published online, they too seem to have been destroyed in a fierce conflagration [...] This means that the Iron I site was bigger than previously estimated, with more extensive storage facilities; it could have reached up to 2.5 ha, far larger than the average Iron I habitation site in the highlands. To judge from the biblical tradition and long-term history of the site, its focus and *raison d’être* was probably a cult place on the summit” (Finkelstein 2019: 10-11).

With such logic one can adopt the term “proto-Israelites”, but not use it; dismiss the United Monarchy, but establish an even earlier Saul (cf. Krause, Sergi, and Weingart 2020). Karel van der Toorn noticed the problem (there was no evidence); but did not manage to solve it:

“The Temple of Shiloh (Khirbet Seilun) is a problematic example of a sanctuary in the central hill country inherited by the proto-Israelites from the Canaanites, because the evidence for it is entirely circumstantial [...] There is no

firm evidence [...] The most one can say is that the postulated temple makes sense of some of the evidence and fits with the biblical accounts” (van der Toorn 1995: 244 and n. 39).

The trouble is that the Shiloh temple is postulated from the “biblical accounts”, but is then supposed to throw archaeological light on “proto-Israel”... Back in the biblical roots, Finkelstein complained about the “political reasons” (the first Intifada, the Oslo Accords) that stopped the “progress of archaeological work” in the “core areas” of Israel (read: the Occupied Territories) (Finkelstein 2019: 8). These changes in the research orientation are not random. Pursuing a biblical archaeology agenda in 1970-80s Israel and excavating biblical Shiloh was *bon ton*.⁸ In the 1990s, during the Oslo years, it was instead profitable to cast doubts on the historicity of the Bible. In Israel today, it is worthy to make biblical Shiloh great again.

Dever, on his part, grasped the Copenhagen School as the (post-modern) Antichrist: “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” (Dever 1998: 39). But Dever’s “proto-Israelites” are based on a misunderstanding. He was, supposedly, following Barth:

“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).

This is not Barth’s definition, but an earlier one (Barth 1969: 10), which Barth mentions only to refute one page later:

“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).

Dever presents his argument thus:

“How do we know that the ‘Israel’ of the Iron I period *really is* the precursor of the *full-fledged* later Israel, that is, of the Iron II period, so that we are justified in using the term ‘proto-Israel’? [...] The argument is *really a simple* one, and it rests on the demonstrable continuity of material culture throughout the entire Iron I-II period. If the *basic* material culture *that defines a people* exhibits a *tradition* of continuous, non-broken development, then it is reasonable to argue that the *core population* remains the same» (Dever 2002: 44; emphases added; cf. Dever 1995: 68).

The “really simple” argument of material continuity is anything but simple. First, without criteria to define what is “basic”, one can find whatever

8. The first Israeli settlement at Shiloh in 1978 was masqueraded as an excavation camp—without a legal license to excavate (Rubinstein 1978). On the politicization of the biblical and archaeological heritage of Shiloh see further Scholz 2022.

one wants: pick up some desired element as “basic” and ignore others. Second, the formulation “material culture that defines a people” begs the question of whether ethnicities can be defined by material remains. Third, what is a “core population”? Is it part of a new definition of ethnicity? Following such arguments, we might jump to the conclusion that the Hellenistic-Roman Jews (using different material “traits”—Aramean script, coins, ossuaries) were completely unrelated to the former Iron Age Judeans. In 2007, Dever wrote:

“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).

Opposition to “proto-Israel” was branded as a moral crime:

“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 decade later, Dever called the LBII and Iron I “the Proto-Israelite era” and defined the “Proto-Israelites” as a “new ethnic group” (Dever 2017: 77, 88). Other views are branded as absurd:

“The widespread notion that material culture in itself cannot reflect ethnicity is absurd, a product of postmodernist dogma” (Dever 2017: 213).

Material culture can and often does reflect ethnicity, but not always and not always directly. Realizing perhaps that his presentation of Barth left something to be desired, Dever calls it in more recent works a “modification of Barth’s trait list” (!). Still, he insists that continuity of material culture is “decisive” (Dever 2017: 214). Yet, his early “proto-Israel” is a “motley crew” (Dever 2017: 226). An ethnic motley crew? It includes Jebusites, Hivites, Hittites, Shasu, and even Gibeonites and Shechemites:

“The Gibeonites and Shechemites, for instance, are said to have been taken into the *Israelite* confederation by treaty. *Some were born Israelites; others became Israelites by choice.* The confederation’s solidarity, so essential, was ideological, rather than biological—‘ethnicity’”.⁹

To follow Dever, one must imagine a “proto-Israelite” era (Iron I) with ethnic “proto-Israelites”, followed by an Israelite era (Iron II) with ethnic Israelites. However, Dever does not follow his own scheme, placing the

9. Dever 2017: 227 (emphases added). These words betray the same misunderstanding: there is no ideological *versus* biological ethnicity or group solidarity, if one follows Barth. See Eriksen and Jakoubek 2019.

Gibeonites/Shechemites in the wrong era.¹⁰ Gibeonites or Shechemites could not be Israelites in a pre-Israelite era. Presumably, Dever intended to say that some Gibeonites/Shechemites became “proto-Israelites” in the Iron I period. Obviously, they are not given the same privilege as Israelites, namely, to be born as “Proto Gibeonite” or “Proto Shechemites”: the “proto” of other peoples is of no interest, only the “proto-Israelites” matter.

In his latest article on this subject, Dever (2023) repeated the same mistake. He claimed that he “had employed Barth’s (1969) trait list as early as 1995”, and insisted that Barth did “endorse such trait lists” (Dever 2023: 85, and n. 10). Speaking about Barth in such terms is nonsense. Dever is not the first to confuse the definitions in Barth’s introduction, and to use the reference “Barth 1969” to justify a position completely untenable with Barth 1969. He joins others, who use “Barth 1969” as a sacred reference, applying it to their writing “in the manner of Frazer’s contagious magic” (Jakoubek 2018: 173).

4. *Recent Studies*

As a surrogate term for Israel, suggesting an early history, “proto-Israelite/s” became popular in the last two decades. When kept in quotation marks, it is not adopted, but merely mentioned (e.g., Borowski 2004: 99; Doak 2007: 2; Palmisano 2013; Stone 2005; Fleming 2012: 20, 250-51). Yet its use without quotation marks gives the impression that it is a “natural” term, which requires no problematizing (Elgvin 2016 n. 34; Matthews 2019: 65, 83, 111). For Manfred Bietak:

“The collective memory of the Proto-Israelites suffering in Canaan under Egyptian oppression and those suffering in Egypt merged in the genesis of Israel’s story of origin from the transformation of oral tradition into written text. The later belief in a stay of the Israelites at Tanis/Zoan was inspired by the transfer of archaeological remains from Pi-Ramesse to Tanis and Bubastis” (Bietak 2015: 17).

“Israel’s story of origin” is the same “later belief in a stay of the Israelites”, that is, the biblical tradition. It does not prove an existence of “proto-Israelites” in the Ramesside Period. According to Bietak, the Shasu were part of “the gene pool” (*sic*) for “proto-Israelites” (Bietak 2015: 21), and “southern Levantine” groups in late Ramesside Egypt were allegedly “culturally and ethnically close to what represents early Israel in the Iron Age” (Bietak 2015: 30). Israel, Early Israel, and Proto-Israel become one.

Glassman turns the table upside down on the “proto-Israelites” and the Bible:

“Having presented the actual historical evidence for the existence of the proto-Israelites in Canaan, Transjordan, the Sinai and the Nile Delta, now we are ready to analyze the biblical tales of Jacob, Joseph, and Moses” (Glassman 2017: 596).

10. There is no Israelite or “proto-Israelite” period: these are not eras, but social constructions.

What “historical evidence” exists for “proto-Israelites”? The “proto-Israelites” were born out of the biblical narratives: they do not exist independently of them. Compare Christopher B. Hays:

“There is little doubt that some portion of the Iron Age proto-Israelite state handed down memories of Egypt, which later became literary traditions in the Hebrew Bible” (Hays 2009: 503).

There was never a “proto-Israelite state”, any more than there was a “proto United States state”. There were various colonies, and the material culture of Boston did not change overnight after the Tea Party. The following statement should be read with a grain of salt:

“Once the Jews are in ‘the land of Canaan’ and organized into the Israelite tribal confederation, the [scholarly] disagreements become less heated. And, from the period of the rise of the monarchy in Jerusalem to the period of the divided monarchy and into Greco-Roman times, there is little significant controversy at all”.¹¹

Joseph Livni writes:

“Debating the question of identifying the Iron Age I material culture with Israel is out of scope. Since ‘the existence of ethnic groups as bounded socio-cultural entities is still accepted’ (Jones 1997: 110) this work shall follow archaeologists and refer to the Iron I distinct material culture of the settlements on the highlands of ancient Israel as Proto-Israel (Dever 2002: 118)” (Livni 2017: 112).

Siân. Jones (1997) did not envision ethnic groups as “bounded socio-cultural entities”; and not all the archaeologists agree about a distinct “proto-Israelite” material culture. Kenton L. Sparks (2007) uses the combination “Israelite/proto-Israelite”. So does Avraham Faust, occasionally (e.g., Faust 2006: 35, 45). Since the *raison d’être* of “proto-Israelites” is to replace “Israelites”, what is the benefit of putting the two together?¹²

In the wake of “Proto-Israel”, other “Proto-entities” were created: “proto Israelite Yahwism”, “Proto-Judahites and Edomites” (Kelley 2009: 266 n. 54, 267); “Proto-Phoenicia” (Killebrew 2019); a “proto-prophet” (Römer 2015: 310); “Proto-Ugaritians” (de Moor 1992: 237); a “Proto-Ammonite” site (Finkelstein 1996: 206); and even “proto-Historical-Archaeology” (Finkelstein 2005).

“There is direct continuity from the Iron I highlands to Iron II Israel and Judah in pottery, settlements, architecture, burial customs, and metals (see,

11. Glassman 2017: 547. The author also uses proto human females, Proto-Indians, Proto-Lydians, proto Swiss state... (Glassman 2017: 11, 1582, 1690, 1715, etc.).

12 “It is extremely likely that it [absence of Philistine pottery] was seen as such by other groups, including the Israelites, or proto-Israelites, or whatever other groups that lived in the highlands at the time” (Faust 2006: 46). Compare with: “The differences between the relationship the Israelites (or proto-Israelites, denoting the Israelites and other totemic groups in the highlands then) had with the Philistines” (Faust 2006: 191). Thus, “proto-Israelites” doubles on “Israelites”, showing how the two are grasped as the same thing.

among other things, the extensive literature by W. Dever and I. Finkelstein on this issue). So whatever the Iron I highlanders called themselves, by their continuity with Iron II they were nevertheless ‘those elements that were not yet Israel, but which went into or led up to the creation of Israel’ (Thompson 1987: 33). Yet since the Merneptah Stele records that the name of this community, or at least part of it, was Israel, once archaeology has established the continuity to Iron II, there is no reason to retain the prefix ‘Proto-’ (Miller 2003: 2).

There is also a lot of continuity of “Canaanite” material aspects from the LB to the Iron Age. So why not assume that the Iron I people were Canaanites? Can we drop the “proto”, as Miller thinks, and create Israelites from “elements that were not yet Israel”? If “those elements” were not yet Israel, one cannot call them Israel. Robert D. Miller, confusingly, retains the “proto” later in his work:

“Because the entire question of what is “Israel” remains an open one, this archaeological section will include geographic areas that must certainly be outside proto-Israel” (Miller 2003: 15).

“Proto-Israel” serves here as a surrogate for “Israel”. Since one cannot pinpoint the exact geography of “proto-Israel”, one does not know which areas were outside it. By posing a misleading certainty, scholars manage to resurrect Israel in the image of “proto-Israel”.

Daniel E. Fleming accepts that it is impossible to raise an early “ethnic Israel” (Fleming 2012: 20). In addition, “None of the biblical uses of ‘Israel’ (...) can be pushed back definitively before the monarchy” (2012: 251). In other words, the Bible itself does not claim that Israel existed before the monarchical period (2012: 252). But then, Fleming reconstructs an early historical Israel, based on two doubtful convictions. First, that archaeology can somehow give us independent evidence “from below” (“archaeologists may guide us with regional and social distinctions, framed by the nature of evidence without writing”, Fleming 2012: 254); yet, he never shows how this can be achieved. Second, that because of the Merneptah Stele, “we are compelled to consider that the name “Israel” already carried political weight long before the appearance of the monarchy” (Fleming 2012: 251). What does “political weight” mean? Fleming tries to circumnavigate ethnicity, suggesting that we can:

“Treat Israel as a social group, not an ethnic group, and most likely the name of a body that acted politically, especially in the sense of a unified social body in conduct of war and peace under coherent leadership” (Fleming 2012: 20).¹³

A self-named population, with acknowledged political leadership, which acts as a unified body, fighting “others”, is an ethnic (or national) group. Acting in union under acknowledged leadership necessitates solidarity, a

13. Compare with p. 254: “returning to the names provided by texts and to [...] names as applicable to polities and peoples, groups that name themselves or others for purposes of action and identification”.

shared ideology, and a sense that “we” differ from “them”. Compare with the statement by J. Hutchinson and A.D. Smith:

“‘An ethnic community’ or ‘ethnie’, then, is one where the members interact regularly and have common interests and organizations at a collective level” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6).

Groups of Slovak or Ukrainian peasants before the nineteenth century CE had different cultures and dialects, but were not ethnic communities, because they did not yet possess a sense of group uniqueness and belonging (Smith 1981: 67-68). Fleming admitted first that we cannot resurrect an early ethnic-Israel, but then resurrected it, just without calling it an “ethnie”. The reconstruction is not devoid of merits; but to reconstruct Israel from Genesis or Joshua is similar to writing a history of Scandinavia from Beowulf, or calling the Helvetic tribes “proto-Swiss” (Davies 2015: 68). Speaking about Israel, instead of “Israel” with quotation marks, is misleading. Readers of Fleming might grasp his reconstruction as “proof” for early ethnic Israel.¹⁴

The term “proto-Israel” only hinders studies, who have merits otherwise. For example:

“The term ‘proto-Israelites,’ which is often used in publications, would be more appropriate [than Israel], but this would be too redundant. The reader should be aware that the term ‘Israel’ prior to the tenth century BCE does not address an organized people. However, an ethnic group named ‘Israel’ did exist in the thirteenth century BCE” (Avner 2021: n. 1).

If there were no “organized people” called Israel before the tenth century BCE, how could there be an “ethnic Israel” in the thirteenth century BCE? There is no ethnic group without social cohesion, that is, organization.

5. The Iron I without “Proto-Israel”

We do not ignore the many solid studies of the Iron I period, but cannot present a lengthy discussion here. We only wish to show that discussing this period without “proto-Israel” is not a loss.

Archaeologists illustrated the hundreds of new, small, rural settlements in the highlands of Iron I Palestine. In them we find common responses to particular economic and climatic conditions. Perhaps there were technical innovations, but these were not the *raison d'être* of the settlements. Terrace walls and rock-cut cisterns facilitated agriculture, but terraces as a widespread phenomenon did not predate the Hellenistic period (Davidovitch et al. 2012; Gadot 2018), and cisterns were not an Iron I invention. The pottery of the highland populations was utilitarian, with a limited repertoire and strong continuity from the LB (Yannai 2006; Mazar 2015). Many pits were used for storage of grains or for waste disposal (Ilan 2019: 292; Marsio 2022). The “four-room” house was suitable for the protection of the family, its goods, and its livestock (Gilboa, Sharon, and Zorn 2014). It appeared in different

14. Similarly, Benz (2016: 303-428) proposes a political organizational strategy of early Israel (a “decentralized multipolity”), stemming from the Amarna period.

regions, including Philistia (Tell Qasile) and Jordan. Cultic locations were mostly small, open-air places with standing stones (Zuckerman 2011; Zwickel 2012).¹⁵ Few tombs associated with the new settlements have been traced (Lehmann and Varoner 2018). Likely, people were buried without funerary objects, not because they could not afford a pot or two, but because marking status and wealth through funerary gifts was not customary (Kletter 2002). The Iron I highland populations were mostly agriculturalists and pastoralists. They were independent, self-organizing, and complex communities (Im 2010; Porter 2013).

The Central Hill country north of Jerusalem (biblical Ephraim and Manasseh) was especially densely settled in the Iron I. It is not easy to determine why. We would suggest that the most important reasons were geological, climatic, and social. Water sources, higher levels of rainfall, and fertile soils were the most important factors. It is impossible to determine if the inhabitants were of one common origin. Tentatively, one may think of local origins; but this is unproven and should not be presupposed *a priori*. People wanted, as always, to live better and eat and drink better. Being poor and using a limited—mostly local—repertoire of material items was not a religious or ideological statement, but a correlate of the economic and social conditions. The Iron I populations of the central highlands had limited commercial links with other regions, and their economy was one of autarchic production. Limited wealth influenced social diversity, resulting in a dearth of clearly visible elites.

In this region the so-called Philistine pottery hardly appears. This pottery, especially vessels used for wine drinking, served as status marker for elites. Its lack is not due—in our opinion—to a conscious desire to avoid elegant or “foreign” pottery, and there is no reason to assume that the highland populations avoided wine. Rather, they lacked the resources needed for acquiring and importing luxury goods. Obviously, a few individuals could buy an elegant wine crater or kylix; but the “flat” social structure and relative poverty did not encourage conspicuous consumption. The elites were not highly distinguishable. It is not surprising that hardly any early attestations of the alphabet in Palestine comes from the hill country north of Jerusalem (See Hamilton 2015; Schniedewind 2020). This area was not only relatively poor, but also deprived of developed administration and the need for writing. These are—in our view—the most important social aspects of the Iron I highland populations, which distinguish them from other communities in the lowlands.¹⁶

15. Perhaps Mt. Ebal is a cultic site, but it is not very “biblical”, cf. Hawkins 2012. There is no final report yet.

16. In this paper we refrain from addressing the “pig debate” since there is no proof that absence of pig bones indicates an ethnic marker, cf. Niesiołowski-Spanò 2015; Kolska-Horowitz et al. 2017; Guillaume 2018; Adler 2022: 25-49.

6. Conclusions

The term “proto-Israelites” should be abandoned: it does not enhance our knowledge and is a misleading term. It implies unity and ideology instead of providing for complexity. More neutral terms, such as “Iron I peoples” or “Iron I highland populations” can be used. The plural form is preferable, reflecting the diversity and the complexity of the period.

The use of the term “proto-Israelites”, despite its lack of essence, has become a matter of deep conviction: a statement of a firm belief in “making ancient Israel great again”. By refusing to write about “early Israel” (with quotation marks), scholars refuse to acknowledge the uncertainties about historicity and ethnicity.

Like “proto-Israelite”, a “proto-language” is a scholarly construct. We all need and use scholarly constructs, but we must not treat them as facts. Proto-languages are assumed to be ‘mother languages’ of several known languages. Historically-documented Proto Languages are rare. We know that Latin was the Proto-Language of Romanian, Catalan, Portuguese, French, Italian and Spanish. Yet, to claim that an imagined “proto-Israel” is the ethnic harbinger of the later known Israel would be similar to calling the Latin-speaking citizens of Rome Proto-Portuguese or Proto-Romanian. Other Iron I population groups do not stand on firmer ethnic grounds, but, unlike “proto-Israel”, they do not carry deep ideological significance at present. Few people today identify themselves with the Edomites or Ammonites.

We believe that scholars have employed the term “proto-Israelites” honestly for advancing research. However, it does not help this goal and eschews critical questions. Can we identify ethnic communities from material remains? Is a continuation of material culture proof for continuation of ethnicity? Was ethnic identity paramount in the life of the Iron I highland populations? Is an ethnic community morally better than other types of human communities? Scholars are entitled to have personal beliefs, but when it comes to discussing and debating such questions, critical assessments of historical terms and analytical concepts ought to have primacy.

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