FILIP ČAPEK

ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY FORMATION OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

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and Identity Formation
of Ancient Israel**

Filip Čapek

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We are able to see that biblical interpretation, historical investigations, and archaeological research can successfully dialogue even in the absence of consensus about the "facts."
—Andrew Vaughn and Ann Killebrew

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ABBREVIATIONS

AASOR	Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research
ABC	Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles (Grayson)
ADPV	Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins
AfO	Altorientalische Forschungen
AHI	Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions—Corpus and Concordance (Davies)
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
ANEM	Ancient Near East Monographs
ANET	Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (Pritchard)
ANES	Ancient Near Eastern Studies
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ArOr	Archiv orientální
ATSAT	Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament
BA	The Biblical Archaeologist
BAR	British Archaeological Reports/Biblical Archaeology Review
BASOR	Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research
BN	Biblische Notizen
BVB	Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
COS	The Context of Scripture (Hallo—Younger)
CV	Communio viatorum
DB	Darius' Besitun Inscription (Schmitt)
EA	El-Amarna Correspondence (Rainey)
ESHM	European Seminar in Historical Methodology
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HBS	Herders Biblische Studien
HeBAI	Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel
HS	Hebrew Studies
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HThKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
IJRHSC	International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies
JAEI	Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections
JAJSup	Journal of Ancient Judaism—Supplements
JANES	Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society
JANEH	Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History
JANER	Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions
JAS	Journal of Archaeological Studies

JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JHS	Journal of Hebrew Scriptures
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JNSL	Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSS	Journal of Semitic Studies
JTS	The Journal of Theological Studies
JSOT	Journal for Studies of the Old Testament
KUSATU	Kleine Untersuchngen zur Sprache des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt
LAS	Leipziger Altorientalistische Studien
NEA	Near Eastern Archaeology
NEASB	Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin
NSAJR	New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Religion
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OJA	Oxford Journal of Archaeology
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
ORA	Orientalische Religionen in der Antike
OTS	Old Testament Series
PEQ	Palestine Exploration Quarterly
RB	Revue Biblique
SAAS	State Archives of Assyria Studies
SCJ	Stone-Campbell Journal
SHCANE	Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East
SJOT	Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament
SR	Studies in Religion
TA	Tel Aviv
TAD	Textbook of Aramaic Documents (Porten—Yardeni)
UF	Ugaritische Forschungen
VT	Vetus Testamentum
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplement Series
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WO	Die Welt des Orients
WUB	Welt und Umwelt der Bibel
ZAW	Zeitschrift für Altestestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZDPV	Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins

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Prague, January 2024

1. INTRODUCTION

Neither archaeologists nor biblical scholars have access to the whole truth,
due not only to the limits of reliable information but also to their own inevitable subjectivity.
History writing is about the present, as well the past.
—William Dever

The origins of ancient Israel are shrouded in mystery, with many—often unforeseen—variables which influence the decision-making processes used in methods of reconstructing its early days and even scholars' understanding of the nature of the object of this search itself. In this respect, there are different assignments for archaeologists, historians, biblical scholars, and theologians—although their efforts often overlap and complement each other. Essentially, each of the professions must focus on three areas of inquiry and their relationship to each other: firstly, non-written material culture; secondly, literature of the ancient Levant; and thirdly, biblical texts, which present an important and very extensive resource for examining the past.

The first area of inquiry involves inspecting, analysing, and evaluating material culture, discovering specific pieces of information, and proposing interpretations. Unlike in the case of biblical testimony, which mostly comes from a later period of time and expresses the specific perspectives and desires of its later authors or editors, it seems that with material culture we basically stand on firm ground. However, even here we will encounter countless pitfalls, as this book will often demonstrate, which will make it impossible to find a simple solution to the mystery of Israel's creation and the formation of its identity. This search will lead us to more questions and interpretive crossroads than answers. What was there at the beginning; what was Israel? Was it a late eleventh or early tenth-century BCE state in the north, near the ancient city of el-Jib (the biblical Gibeon)? Or should the origins be sought more to the south, in the region of the Shephelah? There, the tenth century BCE saw the formation of a political entity in the valleys of the Judaean Mountains which also extended to their southwest, that some identify as the Kingdom of Judah even then. What is its relation to Jerusalem? And if Israel was created even earlier, at the end of the Late Bronze Age in the thirteenth century BCE, as suggested by the Merneptah Stele (COS 2.6), how was Israel then related to the later city-states and states in the region? What is the relation between

Late Bronze Age city-states, such as Jerusalem (presumably), and Iron Age territorial states? Is there a connection to be found? Or maybe Israel was not created until much later. Perhaps it became an independent political entity in the ninth century BCE, with the Kingdom of Judah being brought to life even later in connection with Neo-Assyrian influence over the Southern Levant in the second half of the eighth century BCE. As will be shown throughout this book, solutions to the mystery of Israel's creation greatly depend upon defining this object of study. This issue will be a topic of discussion, as well as the issue of the transformations of the name "Israel," which was not used to describe only one single entity, as it had numerous bearers during the more than five hundred years of history under discussion.

The second area of inquiry is tied to ancient non-biblical texts. In this area, knowledge is not obtained from the evidence of human activity in architecture, farming, or cult. There are no ramparts, walls, palaces, temples, religious items, or small objects of material culture for daily use. Rather, this area of inquiry centres upon written records, and those describing the origins of Israel are especially scarce. The domain of epigraphers, the literature of Israel's early reconstructed history, is only fragmentary, with more complete documents first appearing in the ninth century BCE. These documents shed their own light on the origins of Israel and, secondarily, on the Kingdom of Judah.

The third area concerns Old Testament texts. Separating these texts from non-biblical textual evidence is crucial, due to the nature of the perspective(s) presented and advocated by biblical materials in their own specific historical contexts. Biblical texts are distinct entities which should be separately investigated and analysed, before engaging these in direct confrontations with material culture and non-biblical textual evidence. In terms of synchronicity, the existence of a direct link between a historical event and a biblical text referring to it is both an ideal—and often unprovable—reality, and a trap set for laypeople and scholars alike who neglect critical approaches to biblical interpretation. The biblical textual corpus is similar to the ancient tell. It is an entity with multiple layers that must be identified within their specific

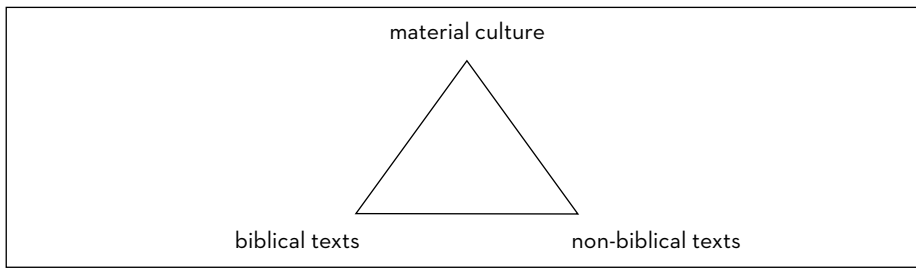

Fig. 1. The interrelationship between the three variables of interpretation

times and places; only afterwards can the data acquired be confronted with the other variables of interpretation—i.e., material culture and non-biblical texts.

Continuity and discontinuity are two words which play a key role in the study of Israel's history. Firstly, they aptly describe all reconstructions of the course of history. These are characterised by observable links and connections, but also turns and shifts due to puzzling data, as well as missing evidence for various events or even entire periods. Furthermore, continuity and discontinuity will be shown to be tools of interpretation used in the formation of ancient Israelite identity. Constituted mainly in retrospect, this identity was formed in various ways: by establishing an independent concept of the history of Israel and the neighbouring nations, justifying the origins of Israel, taking root in a specific geographic area, and often by very strict religious and cultural self-determination. This identity was construed against the flow of historical continuity, and historical "facts" are treated accordingly. Very simply put, the biblical discussions concerning Israelite identity are not about the exact manner in which events took place, but about the way they should have taken place to make sense to a very specific group of text authors and, consequently, also readers. In the process of identity formation everything is subordinated to this assignment. This includes seemingly objective and unquestionable facts—such as chronological lists which ostensibly catalogue the reigns of kings, lists of territories that they controlled, and also genealogical overviews (Oeming 1990).

Biblical texts place a characteristic emphasis on the formative role of the past in the formation of the identity of ancient Israel. The past is uniquely adapted and documented in this literature to carry weight and relevance for the present day (cf. Sláma 2017). Past events provide varying perspectives on the present, which shows a primary reason why the biblical writers included the material that they did in these great Old Testament compositions. This includes material such as the distant origin stories which have no apparent historical value, the patriarchal traditions, the exodus from Egypt, the occupation and settlement of Canaan, and even the monumental Deuteronomistic History. Finally, this explains the monotheising tendency present within biblical texts, though monotheism was not a primary feature of Israel's religion for the majority of the history depicted throughout these biblical texts (cf. Herzog 1999; Rollston 2003; Heiser 2008; Mastin 2010; Stern 2010; Stavrakopoulou and Barton 2010; Sugimoto 2014; van Oorschot and Witte 2017; Becking 2020).

In all the founding and historicising myths and texts linked to ancient Israel, it is necessary to differentiate between the idealised depiction of history they present and the actual reconstructible historical reality—examples of where this is necessary include events such as the formation of the United

Monarchy or the mass exodus and mass return of the Judeans to the land in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. Confronting these two aspects, both of which are of considerable importance and have crucial roles to play, shows that the biblical depictions of these events function to serve the purposes of their authors' in their own present times.

When considering Israel and its sacred scriptures, the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, it is immediately surprising that so much space is dedicated to the origins, the travels, the nomadic patriarchs, the utopian cult area on Mount Sinai, the period of the Judges, and other such topics which appear to be outside of the area of interest and influence of the nascent Israel. However, modern research has convincingly proven that all these topics are construed through exilic and postexilic perspectives. That is, they are seen through the lens of authors writing from the sixth to fourth century BCE; a reflection which moves from the oldest to the newest and current. This chronological depiction of history explains the present and justifies its connections to everything that came before. The Creation of the world, the promise of land, the establishment of an independent kingdom, the cult of the Jerusalem Temple, and the choosing of the People are all described based on the following rule: the greater the importance of an early period to a later one, the more detailed its description.

Anticipating Israel's later settling and existence in a specific land, the wandering of the patriarchs occurs in an important geographical context, and so its toponymical logic cannot be considered random. There is a similar intention to the cult, which eventually finds its true and—according to biblical authors—only legitimate place in the Jerusalem Temple, after numerous temporary homes. A special position is also assigned to the topic of the kingdom; firstly, the idealised depiction of one in a golden age; and later, a kingdom that is more real and consequently subject to deterioration. Likewise, the land, cult, and political existence of Israel are also central topics and points in a specific time and place in the history of nascent Judaism, which is why they are discussed at such length.

As described by Rolf Rendtorff (2001, 297–301), professor of Old Testament at the University of Heidelberg, the past explains the present, and the present gives weight to the past. The best way to understand the significance of the present is to retell the past for the sake of the present and the continuity of a specific community—in this case, Israel (cf. Deut 6:20; 26:5ff; Josh 4:6–8; 24:2–15; Judg 6:7–11). It is no coincidence that Rendtorff's approach—building on the legacy of Gerhard von Rad (1901–71; see also Oeming 2001), another Heidelberg scholar and one of the most important Old Testament scholars in twentieth-century Europe—reminds one of Jan Assmann's (2000; 2003) concept of mnemohistory. The latter author, an Egyptologist and professor from the same university town, bases his study of collective memory also on von

Rad's (1947; 1961) studies of the Book of Deuteronomy and Old Testament historiography. Paraphrasing Assmann (1992; 2000), biblical texts may be said to contain a connective structure, which lends itself to accepting and forming an identity, and to establishing a connective memory. Part of this connective memory is differentiation (*Entdifferenzierung* in German), in which a distinction is made between the binding past and the present, which then reinforces counter-present recollection (ibid., 2000).

Drawing a line between a historical event (i.e., when, if at all, "it" happened) and a reference to it, no matter how transformed, is one of the principal tasks of not just biblical studies, but also archaeology and history. The interdisciplinary dialogue between these branches also examines the reference itself regarding its historical, religious, and ideological background (i.e., when it was written). There is another element investigated: the reference's function in the community of ancient audiences and readers (i.e., why and how it was written in this, and not any other, manner). In summary, critical research examines two basic historical contexts: firstly, the item to which reference is made; and secondly, the position from which reference is made. If we do not differentiate between the two contexts, we are at risk of plunging into (neo)fundamentalism and a superficial or naïve reading of not only biblical but ancient texts in general.

Frequently considered by many to be very ancient, the Old Testament Book of Hosea may serve as an example for this. In truth, the book itself is highly unlikely to feature any more comprehensive texts that were written in the second half of the eighth century BCE—i.e., directly in the time linked to the eponymous prophet. The book is not an on-site report on what the prophet said and did, but a text with later origins (secondary context), which retrospectively refers to the "original" period (primary context), by retrojecting present opinions into the past; the factual analysis of such views may then be used to trace the reasons for the writing of the book (the "why"). A graphic representation of these references is given below.

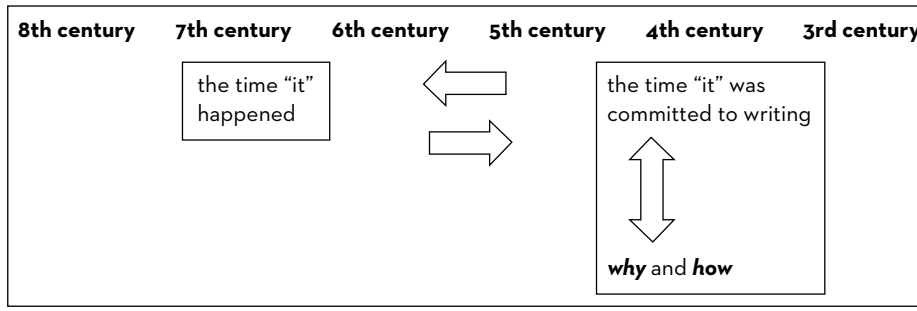

Fig. 2. The relationship between references and their contexts

Consequently, navigating ancient texts is a very complex matter, requiring erudition and competence among scholars and interpreters. This is further complicated by working with material culture and texts outside the Bible—but cognate in nature—which makes the whole enterprise even more daunting.

The chapters in this book are ordered according to a major segment of the chronology of historical periods in the Southern Levant. The default chronology used in the majority of the book is the modified conventional chronology, as introduced and further refined for the Iron Age I and IIA by Amihai Mazar and Christopher Ramsey (2008; for a reaction, see Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2010; Finkelstein 2013; for Vieweger's criticism, see 2006, 54–56, cf. also Boaretto et al. 2019). Instances where a different chronology is used by some scholars will be brought to the reader's attention, including what this means for the interpretation of the related topic.

Tab. 1. High, low, and modified conventional chronologies (overview)

	High chronology	**Low chronology**	**Modified conventional chronology (MCC)**
Late Bronze Age I IIA IIB (III)	1550–1400 BCE 1400–1300 BCE 1300–1250 BCE	1550–1400 BCE 1400–1300 BCE 1300–1130/1071 BCE	1550–1400 BCE 1400–1300 BCE 1300–1200 BCE
Iron Age I	1250–1000 BCE	1130/1071–920/900 BCE	1200/1140–970 BCE (964–944 BCE)
Iron Age IIA	1000–930 BCE	920/900–845 BCE	970–840/830 BCE
Iron Age IIB	930–721 BCE	845–722 BCE	840/830–732/701 BCE
Iron Age IIC	721–586 BCE	722–586 BCE	732/701–605/586 BCE
Neo-Babylonian Period	587/586–539 BCE	587/586–539 BCE	587/586–539 BCE
Persian Period I II	539–450 BCE 450–333 BCE	539–450 BCE 450–333 BCE	539–450 BCE 450–333 BCE

This book attempts to provide a critical reading of Israel's history, which was written by a highly diverse collective of Old Testament "authors." There will be neither a harmonising reading, which takes the picture painted by texts as a given fact, nor a reading complementing biblical texts with "missing" archaeological and epigraphic data, to prevent any tension between biblical texts and history; more options will be offered to the reader, often as theories and hypotheses about alternate ways to understand biblical narratives on historical as well as theological levels. In connection with this search

for the identity of ancient Israel, this effort to comprehend these old texts may be described as an analysis of memory traces, either visible, hidden, or somewhere between these two positions. As a biblical scholar cooperating with archaeologists and historians, the author of this book is an expert on biblical texts and theologian first, and an archaeologist second. Consequently, he may view the texts in a less "biblicist" manner than his fellow archaeologists and historians, but on the other hand, he is certain to have less knowledge of, and experience in, the archaeological field.

The following pages have a dual purpose: To reintroduce the basic state of research in recent decades, and secondly, the book aims to draw the reader's attention to new hypotheses and reconstructions based on the interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical studies, archaeology and history. These newly proposed interpretations are founded upon ongoing archaeological research in Israel, in which scholars and students from the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University take part, in cooperation with Tel Aviv University and the Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology.

2. ORIGINS (LATE BRONZE AGE TO LATE IRON AGE I)

If historical (verifiable) truth should be our only concern,
the history of ancient Israel should not only be very short
(written on ten pages or so), but it would also be utterly boring.
—Hans Barstad

Attempts to determine the very origins of Israel are destined to fail if we expect to discover a clearly defined state with borders, evidence of centralised administration, and existing literature. These origins are often sought in the period between the Late Bronze Age IIB (1300–1200 BCE) and Iron Age I (1200–970 BCE). However, none of these three aspects have been identified conclusively throughout these periods. There is no founding charter, nor any clear indication that "something" emerged in the southern Canaan area that could be termed *Israel*. The word itself exists courtesy of the late thirteenth-century BCE Merneptah Stele (see COS 2.6), but there are various interpretive pitfalls when attempting to select an entity corresponding to that name which is identifiable in terms of territory and politics. There is an even older occurrence of the designation *Israel* on a fragment of a statue base, now housed in Berlin; the fragment dates to the time of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BCE), the father of Merneptah (1213–1203 BCE), but no certain conclusions can be drawn from reading it (see discussion in Görg 2001; Wood 2005; Hoffmeier 2007; van der Veen, Theis, and Görg 2010). Do we seek a nation, a specific state, or something else entirely? The hieroglyphic name *Israel* from the stele itself is a word for a group of people whose region cannot be directly and unequivocally determined; as such, it seems to originate more from the context of localising Late Bronze Age Canaanite city-states based on the Amarna correspondence (Mynářová 2007). In this early period, a connection of the name *Israel* with a state, a state-like entity, or a Canaanite city-state may be ruled out with a high degree of probability (cf. Frevel 2016, 57).

Seeking Israel at the end of the Late Bronze Age means reconstructing, or rather constructing, an identity in the time when Canaanite city-states were collapsing throughout the area. Differing from region to region in severity, the collapse happened gradually and was caused by various circumstances. The least likely explanation—which is probably impossible to be considered a determining factor—is that there is an "Israelite" trace, as depicted in bib-

lical texts written centuries later, mainly the Book of Joshua. Championed by the first generations of archaeologists, this interpretation continues to be advocated by some contemporary archaeologists, historians, and theologians of a fundamentalist and conservative persuasion, who do not differentiate the ideological basis of biblical texts from the historical, with the latter working for the former (for more, see chapter I). It is not the aim of this book to confirm such a setting in history; this possibility has already been convincingly disproven by critical research, which is why it should suffice to refer the reader to the literature included in the bibliography.

A lively debate is taking place as to the reasons for the gradual collapse of Canaanite city-states, and the role of specialised scientific disciplines continues to grow: archaeozoology, palynology, dendroarchaeology, climate archaeology, as well as the use of radiocarbon method, which all further hone the accuracy the dating of the period under discussion (Langgut, Gadot, and Porat 2013; Cline 2014; Langgut et al. 2015; Regev et al. 2017). There are a number of factors which contributed to this collapse each of which impacted multiple key aspects of these societies, the most common of which are the following:

It follows that this collapse was not a one-off event, but a longer process which occurred throughout the late thirteenth to second half of the twelfth century BCE. Moreover, some sites were not destroyed, and so the settlement system did not collapse everywhere (cf. Finkelstein 2013; Gadot 2017; Dever 2003; 2020); other sites were resettled quickly after the destruction; while yet others were temporarily abandoned (e.g., Lachish VII and VI). Selected destructions dates are presented in the following table.

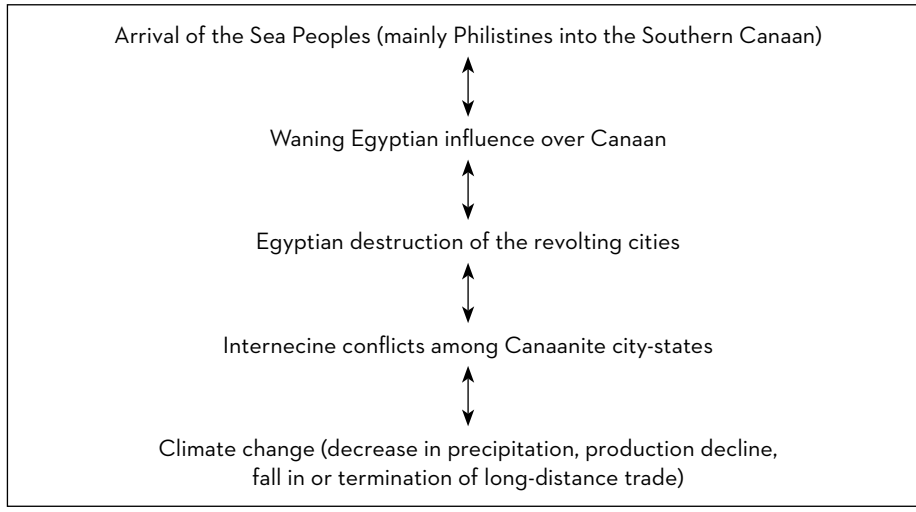

Fig. 3. Factors contributing to the Late Bronze Age city-state system collapse

Tab. 2. City-state destructions that are dated to the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age I

Site	Time of destruction
Azekah S2–5b/T2–3b	ca. 1140 BCE
Aphek X	ca. 1230 BCE
Ashdod XIV	ca. 1200 BCE
Beth-shean VII	sometime after 1150 BCE
Beth-shemesh IVB (or 6)	ca. 1200 BCE
Bethel 1	ca. 1200 BCE
Hazor XII	sometime after 1250 BCE
Lachish VII Lachish VI	ca. the first half of the twelfth century BCE ca. 1130 BCE
Megiddo VIIB Megiddo VIIA	second half of the thirteenth century BCE second half of the twelfth century BCE
Gezer XV	ca. 1200 BCE
Tell Balata (Shechem) X	ca. 1200 BCE (possibly 1150 BCE)
Beit Mirsim C	late thirteenth century BCE
Timnah / Tel Batash VI	ca. 1200 BCE

The end of Canaanite city-states—or the majority of these—was a key development. This becomes most apparent when comparing total city areas in the Bronze Age and the subsequent settlement in the Iron Age I and early Iron Age IIA. The main shift concerns the architecture, since the monumental elements typical of the Bronze Age vanish almost entirely. The evidence includes the absence of massive fortification walls or their significant reduction (see, e.g., Gezer XV and Tel Zayit IV), and there are apparent changes in pottery as well. However, despite the provable population decline and the documented destruction of numerous sites, the area of southern Canaan did not remain uninhabited. These developments were regionally determined: some locations were more affected by the decline in population and settlements than others (Frevel 2016, 68–70). In certain areas, such as the Philistine Pentapolis on the Coastal Plain and on the borders of the western Shephelah, the city-state system survived, only under a different local hegemon (see below). Still, an overall urban shrinkage is apparent and well documented. Tel Arad, built in the Bronze Age on nine hectares of land, was reduced to a fort of a mere half hectare in the Iron Age. Similar trends are observable in Megiddo and Hazor, where the original areas of the tells and the adjoining settlements shift from double (e.g., Hazor with eighty hectares) to single digits.

What happened in southern Canaan after the collapse of city-states in the Late Bronze Age? This question, which is closely linked to the search for Israel's origins, can be divided into three queries. The first and second focus

on examining notional pre-histories; without them, we cannot talk about the origins of Israel and Judah as two independent and, in certain periods, intimately connected political entities. The third query will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. The queries are as follows:

1. What was the general situation in the area of southern Canaan after the collapse of the city-state system (2.1)?
2. In what way was the area settled, and what was its social organisation (2.2)?
3. When and how did Israel and Judah first appear (3)?

2.1 IRON AGE I DEVELOPMENTS

The end of the city-state system in the Late Bronze Age brought about major developments in terms of settlement, administration, social relations, and agriculture. Viewed through a slightly simplifying "textbook" lens, the period was typified by the disappearance of cities (urban shrinkage) and a reduction in city populations (deurbanisation), while rural settlements and villages grew and developed. An intensive transition to agriculture, pastoral farming, and local barter trade also characterised the period. At the turn of the Iron Age I and Iron Age IIA, this trend gradually changed in two ways: sites that saw a decline in urban culture were reurbanised, and entirely new settlements were established.

The Iron Age I settlement transformation is linked to a shift in agriculture, moving from surplus to self-sufficient (subsistence) agriculture. Long-distance trading involving strategic commodities as well as luxury items which was characteristic of the Late Bronze Age ceased or occurred in a limited capacity, as evidenced by the pottery assemblages discovered (cf. Gadot, Lipschits, and Gross 2014). The morphology of these assemblages changed to simpler pottery types which were intended almost exclusively for everyday use. Some types of pottery vanished completely, and decorativeness (use of decor and colours) was minimal. However, such a dramatic disruption of the urban settlement was not seen in such localities as Kinneret in the

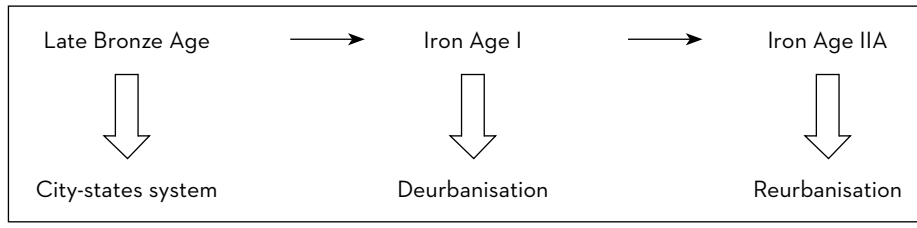

Fig. 4. Urbanisation changes from the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age IIA