

## The “High Court” of Ancient Israel’s Past: Archaeology, Texts, and the Question of Priority

**DANIEL PIOSKE**



# THE “HIGH COURT” OF ANCIENT ISRAEL’S PAST: ARCHAEOLOGY, TEXTS, AND THE QUESTION OF PRIORITY

DANIEL PIOSKE  
GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Many have recognized how the study of ancient Israelite history has been substantially transformed over the previous half-century.<sup>1</sup> These changes have impressed themselves not only on what it is that we know about Israel’s past, but, perhaps even more, on how we now come to know it. Martin Noth’s claim that the Hebrew Bible presents itself on a “higher plane” as “the real source (*die eigentliche Quelle*) for the history of Israel”<sup>2</sup> is so striking in this vein because of how little support it would garner today, and yet this argument was advanced not centuries but only decades ago by one of the foremost scholars of his generation. That Noth’s assessment of the sources available to us is no longer tenable is the result of a number of developments that have taken hold since the publication of his important work, though two stand out. The first is the avalanche of data that has cascaded into our discipline in the last fifty years, unearthed and published by a collection of archaeologists who have rendered regions of southwest Asia the most excavated plots of land on our globe. The second is a broad awareness among historians of the complications that pertain to how one interprets the information we possess. It is no longer possible, that is, to presume the transparency of this data or of our scholarly detachment from the commit-

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<sup>1</sup> For recent, cogent overviews, see especially M.B. Moore, *Philosophy and Practice in Writing a History of Ancient Israel* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006); J.L. Ska, “Questions of the ‘History of Israel’ in Recent Research,” in M. Saebo (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation, III/2: The Twentieth Century*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 391–432; I. Wilson, “History and the Hebrew Bible: Culture, Narrative, and Memory,” *Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation* 3.2 (2018), 1–69; and A. Tobolowsky, “Israelite and Judahite History in Contemporary Theoretical Approaches,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 17.1 (2018), 33–58.

<sup>2</sup> “[. . .] to which all sources are secondary.” M. Noth, *Geschichte Israels*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 52.

ments we bring to the interpretation of it, commitments that are necessarily informed by the interests we harbor and the vantage points we happen to occupy.<sup>3</sup>

And interpret we must.<sup>4</sup> But how to do so in light of these developments is a question more difficult to answer than in the earlier days of the discipline when such concerns were focused chiefly on the historical information the Bible may impart. For what confronts us now is a staggering amount of archaeological data and the challenge of how to avail oneself of these remains for a history long written with texts principally in view. If the need to circumvent these older approaches is apparent, less obvious is how they might be replaced when the sources we possess are so diverse and, at moments, discordant.<sup>5</sup> Piecing together the puzzle of ancient Israel's history is such a formidable task, consequently, not only because the components do not fit neatly together, but also because the outline of the puzzle itself can no longer be established in advance of our inquiries.<sup>6</sup>

Which is perhaps why so few try to configure it. But among those who do, the work of two scholars, Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman, stands out not only for the sheer amount of publications they have produced in the past three decades but also because of their disagreement with regard to how historical interpretation should unfold. This debate centers, *in nuce*, on the question of priority: should historical analysis prioritize the excavated remains produced through archaeological research or privilege instead the claims made within ancient writings? For Na'aman, the difficulty

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<sup>3</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, K. Ansell-Pearson (ed.), trans. C. Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 [1887]), 87; H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Continuum, 2006 [1960]), 267–304; F. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 48–86. “This aporia,” Ricoeur writes, “which we can call that of the truth in history, becomes apparent through the fact that historians frequently construct different and opposed narratives about the same events.” P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004 [2000]), 242.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. P. Putnam (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004 [1954]), 138–55; H. White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History* 4.2 (1973), 281–314; A. Momigliano, “The Rules of the Game in the Study of Ancient History,” *History and Theory* 55 (2016), 39–45; Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 333–42.

<sup>5</sup> So in Frevel's extensive review of approaches to the interpretive relationship between archaeology and the biblical writings, he concludes that the problem of determining the interpretive relationship between the two is “still current and by no means resolved.” C. Frevel, “‘Dies ist der Ort, von dem geschrieben steht. . .’ Zum Verhältnis von Bibelwissenschaft und Palästinaarchäologie,” *BN* 47 (1989), 88.

<sup>6</sup> Even the “theme and object” of historical research, Gadamer writes in a remarkable passage, “are actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 285.

with archaeological data is its fragmentary nature, a collection of vestiges whose existence is so often predicated on their capacity to evade the forces of erosion that have dissipated the great preponderance of materials from antiquity.<sup>7</sup> The conclusions drawn from this partial and incomplete record can, therefore, be “quite limited,” even misleading, and as a result “should be treated with caution.”<sup>8</sup> Finkelstein, working through the various examples put forward in Na’aman’s study, contends instead that “solid data from well-excavated sites” should “prevail” over against the claims of ancient texts, especially with regard to the references found within the Hebrew Bible.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Finkelstein writes in a book-length historical study that the “lead narrative” followed in his monograph “is that of archaeology—the results of excavations and surveys alike,” an orientation pursued so as to avoid the “poorly told” and “ideologically twisted” stories found in the biblical writings.<sup>10</sup>

The intent of the following is to enter into this debate and examine what both scholars refer to as the “high court” of ancient Israel’s past, or a disagreement pertaining to what evidence, textual or archaeological, deserves priority within matters of historical analysis. Rather than attempting to resolve this debate, however, the aim of this investigation is to dissolve it by problematizing the premises that undergird an approach that accords precedence to one type of source over another.<sup>11</sup> Instead, this study argues that the relationship between archaeological and written evidence requires a more lithe-some interpretive approach that resists the desire to sanction either as preeminent within acts of hermeneutical reflection. Drawing on both archaeological and historical discussions of interpretation, this study concludes with a sketch of how this hermeneutical framework might be conceived.

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<sup>7</sup> N. Na’aman, “Does Archaeology Really Deserve the Status of ‘High Court’ in Biblical Historical Research?”, in B. Becking and L. Grabbe (eds.), *Between Evidence and Ideology* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 165–83. Cf. idem, “Text and Archaeology in a Period of Great Decline: The Contribution of the Amarna Letters to the Debate on the Historicity of Nehemiah’s Walls,” in P. Davies and D. Edelman (eds.), *The Historian and the Bible: Essays in Honour of Lester L. Grabbe* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 20–30.

<sup>8</sup> Na’aman, “Archaeology,” 167.

<sup>9</sup> I. Finkelstein, “Archaeology as a High Court in Ancient Israelite History: A Reply to Nadav Na’aman,” *JHS* 10 (2010), 1–8 (7).

<sup>10</sup> I. Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 5, 159.

<sup>11</sup> The aim, then, is to attend to questions of “first principles” that A. Frendo also advocates in a work that similarly explores the relationship between texts and artifacts, if from a different perspective and with other interpretive interests in mind. A. Frendo, *Pre-Exilic Israel, the Hebrew Bible, and Archaeology: Integrating Text and Artefact* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), ix, 5.

### THE SPADE SUBORDINATE TO THE TEXT

The debate between Finkelstein and Na'aman is in some sense a consequence of an earlier consensus that no longer holds. Much has been written, of course, on the different historical approaches developed by W.F. Albright and Albrecht Alt in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>12</sup> but both scholars and their students shared an understanding of the ancillary, essentially subordinate role archaeology played to ancient texts in matters of historical interpretation. Even with Albright's impressive introductory discussion of archaeology in *From Stone Age to Christianity*,<sup>13</sup> as a whole the history told in this monograph moves in a trajectory that uses archaeological finds largely in an effort to support and supplement the past recounted within the biblical writings. If Alt's work is driven by different historical concerns and is more circumspect with regard to the historical character of biblical storytelling, it is nevertheless also heavily tilted toward the claims of texts in the historical reconstructions proposed.<sup>14</sup> And so in the histories written by those that followed, whether in the case of John Bright or Siegfried Herrmann, J. Maxwell Miller and John Hayes or Herbert Donner, one finds studies that, though attentive to material culture, prioritize the claims of texts in their reconstructions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Both Albright and Bright, for example, cited certain "nihilistic" tendencies they perceived in the work of Alt and Noth (W.F. Albright, "The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archaeology," *BASOR* 74 [1939], 12; J. Bright, *Early Israel in Recent History Writing: A Study in Method* [London: SCM Press, 1956], 53–54). For Noth's response, see "Der Beitrag der Archäologie zur Geschichte Israels," in G.W. Anderson et al. (eds.), *Congress Volume Oxford 1959* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 262–82. On this debate, see also J. Hayes, "The History of the Study of Israelite and Judaeon History," in J. Hayes and J.M. Miller (eds.), *Israelite and Judaeon History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 65–68; and Moore, *Philosophy and Practice*, 46–74.

<sup>13</sup> W.F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1940), 20–32, 88–149. Cf. Albright's later reflections on the relationship between archaeology and biblical studies in idem, "The Impact of Archaeology on Biblical Research—1966," in D. Freedman and J. Greenfield (eds.), *New Directions in Biblical Archaeology* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), 1–14.

<sup>14</sup> One finds this preference within a number of Alt's seminal studies, including, for example, in "Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina," in *Kleiner Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, vol. 1 (C.H. Beck: München, 1953), 89–125; or idem, "Jerusalems Aufstieg," in *Kleiner Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, vol. 3 (C.H. Beck: München, 1959), 243–57. Noth, Alt's student, describes the function of archaeology as one of "shedding light (*aufzuhellen*) on the background of the biblical history of the land," thus again underscoring the subordinate role archaeology plays to the biblical traditions in matters of interpretation. M. Noth, "Grundsätzliches zur geschichtlichen Deutung archäologischer Befunde auf dem Boden Palästinas," *PJ* 34 (1938), 7.

<sup>15</sup> J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000 [1959]); S. Herrmann, *Geschichte Israels in alttestamentliche Zeit*

On this they were not alone. Moses Finley, the great historian of Classical antiquity, comments in a monograph on historical method that it was “*self-evident* that the potential contribution of archaeology to history is, in a rough way, inversely proportional to the quantity and quality of the available written sources.”<sup>16</sup> For Finley, the material finds produced by archaeologists were of historical value, but were so above all in circumstances when written sources were few or poorly preserved. Thus, even with regard to historical interests that might lend themselves to considerations of archaeological evidence, such as discussions of economic activity in antiquity, the entry point into this subject matter is not that of material markers of trade or production but an extended reflection on Cicero’s writings on status.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, even afar a field as scholarship surrounding Indian Buddhism one reads of interpretive approaches driven by “a curious and unargued preference” for textual sources among historians, a perspective linked by its scholars to an old Protestant bias that archaeologists of South Asia were still trying to negotiate and evade.<sup>18</sup> John Moreland’s criticism of the fundamentally “logocentric”<sup>19</sup> mindsets he observes among the historians surveyed in a monograph focused on the relationship between archaeology and texts is one that rang true for many fields of history, consequently, and certainly not only that of ancient Israel.<sup>20</sup> Looking back on previous generations of scholarship, Moreland comments that “the relationship between archaeology and history was, until quite recently, akin to that between servant and master.”<sup>21</sup>

That Finkelstein should resist the long precedence given over to texts by historians is not, then, his resistance alone. Nor is Finkelstein the only scholar who has sought to redress the imbalance as to what type of evidence factors into histories devoted to ancient Israel.

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(München: Kaiser, 1973); J.M. Miller and J. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); H. Donner, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel und seiner Nachbarn in Grundzügen*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984–1986).

<sup>16</sup> M. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1986 [1975]), 93 (My italics).

<sup>17</sup> M. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 41–61.

<sup>18</sup> G. Schopen, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31.1 (1991), 1–23.

<sup>19</sup> J. Moreland, *Archaeology and Texts* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 33.

<sup>20</sup> On the prehistory of this “language-centered ideology” and an incipient historical investigation into the changing semiotics of linguistic and material domains amid Iron Age funerary monuments from the Levant, see now S.L. Sanders, “Words, Things, and Death: The Rise of Iron Age Literary Monuments,” in R. Yelle, C. Handman, and C. Lehigh (eds.), *Language and Religion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 327–48.

<sup>21</sup> Moreland, *Archaeology and Texts*, 11. Cf. idem, “Archaeology and Texts: Subsistence or Enlightenment,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006), 135–51.

Already in 1987, Robert Coote and Keith Whitelam produced a history that aimed to upend the “all too common subjugation of archaeology in the service of biblical studies,” with their work assigning “priority” instead “to archaeological data within a broad interdisciplinary framework.”<sup>22</sup> Their monograph appeared on the heels of William Dever’s effort to establish an independent Syro-Palestinian branch of archaeology set apart from the biblical archaeology movement still current at the time.<sup>23</sup> Though receptive to the integration of material culture and ancient writings within earlier historical studies,<sup>24</sup> Dever’s approach has recently been harnessed to compose a lengthy monograph whose title, *Beyond the Texts*, belies its aim of composing a “new and better” history that is “archaeology based,” one in which “archaeology becomes not only a source but a *primary* source for history-writing.”<sup>25</sup> Among both seasoned scholars<sup>26</sup> and those of a subsequent generation one encounters,<sup>27</sup> in fact, an upsurge of archaeologists who have sought to pursue historical reconstructions with “an agenda uninfluenced by the written sources”

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<sup>22</sup> R. Coote and K. Whitelam, *The Emergence of Israel in Historical Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 19, 8. So also Thompson advocated for an independent history of Palestine, removed from biblical considerations, and writes that the “Bible’s world does not belong to the discipline of archaeologists.” T. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 34.

<sup>23</sup> W. Dever, “Syro-Palestinian and Biblical Archaeology,” in D. Knight and G. Tucker (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 31–74. Cf. idem, “Biblical and Syro-Palestinian Archaeology: A State-of-the-Art Assessment of at the Turn of the Millennium,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 8 (2000), 91–116.

<sup>24</sup> So, for example, Dever’s chapter on “Salvaging the Biblical Tradition” and his methodology of “convergences,” in *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 223–41.

<sup>25</sup> W. Dever, *Beyond the Texts: An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 8. Italics original.

<sup>26</sup> D. Ussishkin, also cited in Na’aman’s study, similarly remarks that “the corpus of archaeological data should be the starting point” of historical research. D. Ussishkin, “The Borders and De Facto Size of Jerusalem in the Persian Period,” in O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 147–48.

<sup>27</sup> Joffe writes that “in methodological terms this ‘secular’ approach seeks to tack away from texts toward archaeology [. . .] in an effort to write ‘history from things’ ” and concludes with the comment that “the anger with which some biblical critics approach the problem, and explicitly reject archaeology’s contribution, suggests that archaeology and text should perhaps remain separate domains.” A. Joffe, “The Rise of Secondary States in the Iron Age Levant,” *JESHO* 45.4 (2002), 427, 456.

since, it is argued, there are “clear advantages in using the archaeological record in place of historical [written] sources as the principal database.”<sup>28</sup>

But the degree to which these archaeologists have advanced beyond texts is uncertain. Though opening with a prolonged discussion of the “tendentious” and “largely propagandistic” character of textual evidence,<sup>29</sup> Dever’s recent monograph, for example, does not hesitate to draw on ancient writings, both extra-biblical and biblical, when coming to its historical conclusions. So one reads that the Stepped Stone Structure in Jerusalem is to be interpreted as part of the “‘Jebusite’ city of the Hebrew Bible”<sup>30</sup> and the ruins of Khirbet Qeiyafa “prove” the account of Saul’s battle in the Elah Valley as described in 1 Sam 17:1–3, to cite only two instances among many others.<sup>31</sup> In terms of Finkelstein’s publications, one comes across a number of studies that are also informed by an acute interest in biblical and extra-biblical writings from antiquity, both in an effort to complicate the historical character of the references embedded in these texts but also, at moments, to support them.<sup>32</sup> On the surface, the “lead narrative” of these investigations is generally one of archaeological data, structured in such a way as to transition from an opening discussion of material culture and into analyses of their historical significance. Yet the overarching interpretive approach used is often more oblique, as the broader assumptions that frame these investigations—the time period covered, the agents of interest, the appellations used, the events focalized—are ones largely determined by the past recounted in ancient texts, especially those found in the Hebrew Bible.

If the archaeological evidence now available renders any attempt to reconstruct ancient Israel’s history without it hollow, the question remains, then, as to whether such histories can be written

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<sup>28</sup> A. Faust, *Israel’s Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion, and Resistance* (London: Equinox, 2006), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Dever, *Beyond the Texts*, 5, 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>32</sup> For a recent reflection on method, see I. Finkelstein, “History of Ancient Israel: Archaeology and the Biblical record—the view from 2015,” *RivB* 68 (2015), 371–92. Such interpretive moves can often be found in the same study. The legendary material about David and Solomon drawn out in Finkelstein and Silberman’s monograph (*David and Solomon: In search of the Bible’s Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* [New York: Free Press, 2006], 121–210), for example, is preceded by a number of chapters that seek out a historical core, including texts that seem to “preserve some uncannily accurate memories of tenth century BCE conditions in the highlands of Judah.” (p. 33). Even among the “poorly told” stories Finkelstein surveys in his *Forgotten Kingdom*, Saul is not only assumed to be a historical individual but one who ruled over a substantial highland territory (Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 37–62). There is, however, no reference to Saul outside of the Bible.

when dispossessed of ancient writings, including those found in the biblical corpus. In a prescient article published nearly three decades ago, J.M. Miller explored precisely this question, inquiring into how a history of ancient Israel might unfold without recourse made to the biblical narrative.<sup>33</sup> The answer was a history mostly vapid and bare. Miller points out, for example, that it is doubtful if the famous, early allusion to Israel in the Merneptah Stele would have been deciphered as such without our knowledge of the Israel named in the biblical writings. And even the better attested Iron Age references to Israel within Assyrian records would have likely led archaeologists only to surmise an inconsequential polity located “somewhere in the vicinity of Damascus or the Phoenician coast,” a small kingdom “founded by one Omri during the first half of the ninth century and surviving to the latter half of the eighth century.”<sup>34</sup> Self-referential understandings of group identity or indigenous conceptualizations of particular beliefs or values are quite difficult to discern, furthermore, when ascertained solely on the basis of ceramic evidence or faunal remains or settlement patterns.<sup>35</sup> And if debates on chronology have become more nuanced with the introduction of carbon 14 dating, a number of the periodizations followed by archaeologists of the southern Levant—such as the end of the Iron Age, the Neo-Babylonian Period, and the beginning of the Persian Period (ca. 586–515 BCE)—are motivated by textual considerations in addition to archaeological ones.<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, it is perhaps not sur-

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<sup>33</sup> J.M. Miller, “Is it Possible to Write a History of Israel Without Relying on the Hebrew Bible?” in D. Edelman (ed.), *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact, and Israel’s Past* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1991), 93–102. Cf. idem, “Old Testament History and Archaeology,” *BA* 49 (1987), 51–62.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, “History of Israel,” 94.

<sup>35</sup> Sauer similarly remarks that, “to write a book on the archaeology of the Roman Empire devoid of all textual evidence or any conclusions derived from textual sources [. . .] would, incidentally, already have to omit the words ‘Roman’ and ‘Empire’ from the title.” E. Sauer, “Introduction,” in idem (ed.), *Archaeology and Ancient History: Breaking down the Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2004), 10.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the problems in dating these periods from an archaeological perspective, see E. Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, Volume 2: The Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Periods (732–332 BCE)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 353–60. As Zorn notes with regard to the site of Tell en-Nasbeh, “the key problem [. . .] which is also an issue at other sites thought to contain sixth century material, is finding clean deposits that can be used to characterize this period.” J. Zorn, “Tell en-Nasbeh and the Problem of the Material Culture of the Sixth Century,” in O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 414.

prising that in a work that draws attention to the effort of archaeologists to do history “unfettered by textual evidence”<sup>37</sup> there is an index replete with citation after citation of biblical passages.<sup>38</sup>

The extent to which ancient writings still contribute to the broader historical presuppositions held by archaeologists of the southern Levant is therefore more pervasive than sometimes realized, especially among those who think they have evaded them. To point up these presuppositions is not to argue that they should be relinquished, but rather to draw attention to how they necessarily inform the historical questions we ask and the answers we provide.<sup>39</sup> The commendable opposition to the old “logocentric” bias of earlier historians is a defiance that is less effective, in this sense, when the stance chosen is to advocate for a different form of preclusion, a preclusion that is largely delusory and rarely followed, at least in practice, by those who recommend it. But if the history of ancient Israel is best served by interpretive approaches that resist efforts to work in isolation of either archaeological or textual data, the debate between Na’aman and Finkelstein is one that confronts us once again: what form of evidence deserves the status of “high court” within studies of ancient Israel’s past?

### WORDS AND THINGS

The question of priority that resides at the center of Na’aman and Finkelstein’s debate stems from the distinct artifacts that come to us from the ancient world. A seal impression unearthed at a site or a royal wedding song (e.g., Ps 45) recorded for later audiences attest to how the past is present in a variety of material vestiges and yet is absent with regard to those agents and practices that once constituted them, and it is the responsibility of archaeologists and historians alike to examine what forms of presence might remain. But how they do so and what traces of the past they study are, of course, different, set apart by the divergent training and discourses of their disciplines and the brute items they investigate.<sup>40</sup> This division extends out further still into matters of reference, of how words and things convey meaning, where the non-discursive, indexical or iconic signification of objects<sup>41</sup> contrasts with the meanings of texts that operate

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<sup>37</sup> Dever, *Beyond the Texts*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 729–32.

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278–85.

<sup>40</sup> B. Halpern, “Text and Artifact: Two Monologues?” in N. Silberman and D. Small (eds.), *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 311–41; Frendo, *Pre-Exilic Israel*, 10–25. Cf. R. Laurence, “The Uneasy Dialogue Between Ancient History and Archaeology,” in E. Sauer (ed.), *Ancient History and Archaeology: Breaking Down the Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2004), 99–113.

<sup>41</sup> A. Wylie, “Epistemological Issues Raised by a Structuralist Archaeol-

at the level of the sentence.<sup>42</sup> The use of ashlar masonry in the construction of a public building or a poem written down by scribes in the service of a ruler may both point to a royal ideology, in other words, but how they express their ideas vary according to the respective mediums used to communicate them.<sup>43</sup> The intent of reflecting on the interpretive relationship between words and things is not therefore to elide such differences, nor to advocate for the mitigation of specializations and their concomitant expertise. The “two monologues” of texts and artifacts that Baruch Halpern describes are reflective of the important distinctions that separate the investigation of words and things, whether in terms of how these items intimate meaning or in the practical necessities of acquiring the proficiency to study them.<sup>44</sup>

But the debate between Na’aman and Finkelstein reveals that where these two disciplines meet is in their desire to understand certain segments of the human past through the interpretation of what traces have been left behind. It is the past, as fragmented and opaque as it may be, that intertwines these fields of interest, and it is the exigencies of understanding the historical significance of these remains that holds them together.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, it is in the realm of historical interpretation that the scholarship of those who work with the writings of the ancient world and those who attend to its ruins converge.<sup>46</sup>

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ogy,” in I. Hodder (ed.), *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 39–46; I. Hodder, “The Contextual Analysis of Symbolic Meanings,” in idem (ed.), *The Archaeology of Contextual Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1–10; C. Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 17; R. Preucel and A. Bauer, “Archaeological Pragmatics,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 34 (2001), 85–96; R. Martin, “Words Alone Are Certain Good(s): Philology and Greek Material Culture,” *TAPA* 138.2 (2008), 325–28.

<sup>42</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 1–24.

<sup>43</sup> L. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation),” in idem, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–86; E. DeMarrais, L. Castillo, and T. Earle, “Ideology, Materialization, and Power Strategies,” *Current Anthropology* 37 (1996), 15–31.

<sup>44</sup> Halpern, “Text and Artifact,” 340.

<sup>45</sup> Frendo, *Pre-Exilic Israel*, 26–38. On this point, see also A. Andrén, *Between Artifacts and Texts: Historical Archaeology in Global Perspective*, trans. A. Crozier (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 145–77; A. Mayne, “On the Edges of History: Reflections on Historical Archaeology,” *The American Historical Review* 113.1 (2008), 93–118; B. Littell, *Historical Archaeology: Why the Past Matters* (London: Routledge, 2016), 20–24; and the incisive observations in Emily Vermeule’s presidential address to the APA in E. Vermeule, “Archaeology and Philology: The Dirt and the Word,” *TAPA* 126 (1996), 1–10.

<sup>46</sup> Frevel, “Dies ist der Ort,” 38; I. Hodder and S. Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge:

Among the possibilities for developing an interpretive framework that attends to this relationship, it is within discussions that have explicitly theorized archaeological practice that an affinity between a textual hermeneutic and an archaeological one has been drawn out and examined most rigorously. Perhaps the best-known scholar to do so is Ian Hodder and the post-processual movement he helped to advance,<sup>47</sup> one predicated, as explained in the seminal *Reading the Past*, on the dual convictions that all archaeological research is theory dependent and that the most promising framework for developing its hermeneutical method is one that draws on the “metaphor” of how one reads texts.<sup>48</sup>

This turn by Hodder to a tradition of textual hermeneutics for insights into the interpretation of archaeological phenomena is of consequence for our study since it affords one approach that intentionally draws together both archaeological and textual interpretive practices. Hodder’s attempt to do so is animated principally by the work of Paul Ricoeur who, in a sustained series of studies, sought to extend the “paradigm of the text” within hermeneutical thought to other forms of human activity beyond that of the written word.<sup>49</sup> A central insight gleaned from Ricoeur’s writings on this theme is that both documents and other, non-discursive acts share a certain resemblance, a kinship that resides, Ricoeur contends, in the propositional content preserved in their physical markings (the markings left on a page, the markings left on a landscape) that require interpretive strategies to understand the meanings communicated through them.<sup>50</sup> Because both words and objects convey meaning, motivated

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Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125–55. Ian Morris, too, argues at the outset of his study that “archaeology is cultural history, or it is nothing.” I. Morris, *Archaeology as Cultural History: Words and Things in Iron Age Greece* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 1.

<sup>47</sup> I. Hodder, “Postprocessual Archaeology,” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 8 (1985), 1–26.

<sup>48</sup> Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 156–205. See also, in this vein, M. Shanks and C. Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. 101–15; Tilley, *Material Culture as Text*, 16–42; idem (ed.), *Reading Material Culture: Structuralism, Hermeneutics, and Post-Structuralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. J. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016 [1981]); especially the article on “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in idem, 159–83. For Hodder’s comments pertaining to his dependence on Ricoeur, see I. Hodder, *Theory and Practice in Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1992), 148. Cf. idem, “This is Not an Article About Material Culture as Text,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 8 (1989), 256–60. For a further, sophisticated reflection on Ricoeur’s work from the realm of the archaeology of the southern Levant, see D. Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 23–28.

<sup>50</sup> “[. . .] social phenomena,” Ricoeur comments in a key passage, also possess a “referential dimension.” Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text,” 182.

in their making by a constellation of “existential perplexities, human predicaments, and deep-rooted conflicts,”<sup>51</sup> the interpretive methods developed by textual scholars could be harnessed by those who work in what Ricoeur calls the “human sciences,” including those in archaeology.<sup>52</sup> Thus, as with the reader who attempts to understand a written reference without the author of the text present to consult, so also, Hodder contends, can the meaning of an archaeological object be ascertained by situating it within a “context” of how other objects, similar and dissimilar to it, are used within a specific setting during a particular period in time.<sup>53</sup>

For Hodder, what this relationship between words and things also portends is the resistance of both to finalized and definitive readings. The meanings of objects are much like those of documents on this view, each of which are considered to be polyvalent and multiplex, always available to other interpretations and the possible insights they may provide.<sup>54</sup> The “openness of our interpretations” is accentuated by Hodder so as to counter a crude empiricism that would suggest otherwise,<sup>55</sup> an openness attributed to a collection of post-structuralist thinkers and to Gadamer’s argument that interpretation can unfold only through the interdependence of the one interpreting and that which one seeks to understand.<sup>56</sup> No interpretation can unfold for either texts or material culture without the presence of the interpreter whose concerns these interpretations reflect.<sup>57</sup> What is achieved through the back and forth of question and answer in the interpretive process, Hodder concludes, is an outcome developed through our “dependence on language,” an interpretation brought to expression, that is, by “constructing narratives, or telling stories.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>52</sup> Schloen, *House of the Father*, 27–28.

<sup>53</sup> “Just as a written word can be more easily understood when it is embedded in a sentence,” Hodder and Hutson write, “an object of material culture is more easily understood if it is situated in place and time and in relation to other archaeological objects.” Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 204. Cf. Hodder, “This is Not an Article,” 250–69.

<sup>54</sup> Hodder, *Theory and Practice*, 161–63; Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 195–205.

<sup>55</sup> In contrast to the view that “our cooking pot has only one meaning,” (Dever, *Beyond the Text*, 26), see the rich discussion of Tilley on the complexities of archaeological interpretation and the conclusion: “A pot is not just a pot and an axe is not just an axe, a design on a pot is not just marks on clay.” Tilley, *Material Culture and Text*, 20. Cf. Preucel and Bauer, “Archaeological Pragmatics,” 93.

<sup>56</sup> Hodder, *Theory and Practice*, 161–63. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305–6.

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 357.

<sup>58</sup> Hodder, *Theory and Practice*, 167.

This approach toward archaeological interpretation is not without its critics.<sup>59</sup> But of the semblances drawn out here between texts and artifacts, it is the contingency of our interpretations on legibility and language that perhaps meets the most resistance from archaeologists whose research is oriented toward the non-discursive realm of material culture, a domain that extends beyond the seeing and hearing of documents to one of smell, touch, and taste. The recent emphasis in archaeological theory on material agency and the irreducibility of the experience of things to linguistic description registers a certain discomfort with interpretive theories hinged on how artifacts might be read and the authority thereby accorded to the reader.<sup>60</sup> Instead, one finds more recent voices that advocate for a shift to the ontological among archaeological theory,<sup>61</sup> a repositioning of analysis aimed at drawing attention to the efficacious and affective features of objects apart from human scrutiny, their sheer givenness in the world, and their resistance to interpretations that would render them simply as symbols of past activity brought to language.<sup>62</sup> So Bjørnar Olsen writes of an opposition against the “hegemony” of textual models of interpretation occasioned by those archaeologists who, it is argued, too easily conflate words with things, “dematerializing” the artifacts they investigate by valuing them only as representations of something else (ideas, behaviors, culture). What is overlooked within this paradigm of textuality, Olsen contends, is the “possible interface where things and bodily practices can be articulated outside the realms of wordy language.”<sup>63</sup>

A recognition of how individuals and the objects they encounter shape one another through their interaction is an important corrective to interpretive approaches that disembodied interpretive theory

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<sup>59</sup> B. Olsen, “Material Culture after Texts: Re-Membering Things,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36.2 (2003), 87–104; A. Jones and B. Alberti, “Archaeology After Interpretation,” in B. Alberti et al. (eds.), *Archaeology After Interpretation: Returning Materials to Archaeological Theory* (Walnut Creek Left Coast Press, 2013), 15–36; J. Thomas, “The Future of Archaeological Theory,” *Antiquity* 89 (2015), 1287–96; K. Bassi, “Seeing the Past/Reading the Past,” *Image & Narrative* 12.3 (2011), 29–50; idem, *Traces of the Past: Classics Between History & Archaeology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 186–202.

<sup>60</sup> B. Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2010); B. Olsen et al., *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1–15, 196–210; T. Ingold, “Toward an Ecology of Materials,” *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* 41 (2012), 427–42; Thomas, “Future of Archaeological Theory,” 1288–90.

<sup>61</sup> See especially the discussion in Jones and Alberti, “Archaeology after Interpretation,” 15–36.

<sup>62</sup> From a historical perspective, see also the important comments in E. Domanska, “The Material Presence of the Past,” *History and Theory* 45.3 (2006), 337–48.

<sup>63</sup> Olsen, *Defense of Things*, 58.

from our embeddedness in the world. But the dissatisfaction expressed here toward the “wordy language” of hermeneutics may have other symptoms. In her incisive study, Karen Bassi calls attention, for example, to the attempt within recent archaeological discussions to foreground the “perdurable materiality” of artifacts over against the language used to describe them,<sup>64</sup> or to contend for the concreteness and lucidity of an object’s meaning in contrast to the more ephemeral, figurative, and arcane ideas that are believed to inhere in texts.<sup>65</sup> Even in Hodder and Hutson’s study, Bassi observes, we come across the argument that material culture is “easier” to read because material items do not convey the “complex ideas and thoughts” of the written word, and that “in so far as material culture is a language, it is simple one when compared to spoken or written language.”<sup>66</sup> To read that past to which material culture refers is, on this view, to engage in an interpretive endeavor that resonates with reading texts but is more straightforward, an approach that attends, in the end, to the meanings of things that are more primordial and transparent than those obscured through writing. A perspective that held out promise to draw together words and things within a single hermeneutical framework thus slowly gives way toward an approach that accords precedent to material culture because of the presumed ease with which the interpretations of such objects come to light.

The importance of such arguments for our purposes here is how they draw near to those made by Finkelstein and those others reviewed above who contend that material culture should have priority in matters of historical analysis. Finkelstein’s observation that writings are “ideologically twisted” in contrast to the evidence of material culture, for example, or Dever’s review of how archaeological data is “superior” to texts by virtue of being “unedited” and a “direct witness” to the past are,<sup>67</sup> if less explicit about their interpretive presuppositions, of a similar perspective to those more theory-minded archaeologists who also find the interpretation of archaeological objects to be more facile than those of documents. In part, this viewpoint has to do with the tangible qualities of artifacts and our predis-cursive experience of them in the world.<sup>68</sup> But this preference is also founded on the premise that the meanings of artifacts are more immediate and less occluded by the trappings of language, that such

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<sup>64</sup> Preucel and Bauder, “Archaeological Pragmatics,” 94.

<sup>65</sup> Bassi, *Traces of the Past*, 186–201.

<sup>66</sup> Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 168.

<sup>67</sup> Dever, *Beyond the Texts*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Jones and Alberti, “Archaeology After Interpretation,” 22–27; So Olsen comments: “I want us to pay more attention to the other half of this story: how objects construct the subject. This story is not narrated in the labile languages, but comes to us as silent, tangible, visible and brute material remains: machines, walls, roads, pits and swords.” Olsen, “Material Culture After Text,” 100.

evidence is “fixed and durable”<sup>69</sup> and “is there, like it or not,”<sup>70</sup> offering us a more clear-cut entry point into a past by being less laden by the uncertainties that language introduces. Dever’s contention that “the text can only refer to the reality; the artifact is the reality,” is altogether consistent with this perspective.<sup>71</sup>

But how to evade language and the texts that express it within matters of interpretation is a question that proves difficult to answer. This is perhaps most clear in Olsen’s sophisticated and thought-provoking work, where the trenchant critiques formed against the “tyranny of the text” are somewhat compromised by an alternative hermeneutic that is equally dependent on texts and language for its realization,<sup>72</sup> including, of course, the very discussion Olsen puts forward. Similar struggles are apparent elsewhere. One finds throughout recent publications an appeal to allow artifacts “to speak to us in their own language,”<sup>73</sup> and not our own, of injunctions that we should abide by an approach to these remains that reads them as texts so long as we “remember that material culture is not text,”<sup>74</sup> and to press forward toward a “posthumanist”<sup>75</sup> understanding of archaeological evidence whose affective sensibilities are directed beyond our humanistic interests. And so it is that we are encouraged to be readers of texts that are not texts, to access meanings of artifacts whose meanings extend beyond our capacity to articulate them, and to be sensitive to a language of material culture that is not language, or something that is “simpler but more ambiguous than language.”<sup>76</sup>

That we are in “something of a catch-22” with such claims, Bassi comments, is apparent.<sup>77</sup> Where these studies often run adrift, that is, is in their attempt to draw on a venerable tradition of hermeneutics while at the same time resisting the challenges that arise within this tradition when the interpretations formed are mediated, inevitably, by the interpreter and the texts used to express them. An appeal to a “metaphor” or “analogy” of reading so as to make the interpretation of artifacts appear more unequivocal than their written

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<sup>69</sup> Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 245.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>71</sup> Dever, *Beyond the Texts*, 16.

<sup>72</sup> Drawing on the writings of Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, among others, Olsen argues for a “reversed analogy: text as thing” that allows these textual items to “speak to us,” to engage us in a “physiognometric dialogue,” that is symmetrical in its relationship between things and individuals. The recourse made to a vocabulary of texts, speaking, and language within this discussion nevertheless attests to how difficult it is to escape them within hermeneutical theory, even in its archaeological incarnations. Olsen, *In Defense of Things*, 52.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 169.

<sup>75</sup> Jones and Alberti, “Archaeology after Interpretation,” 16–20.

<sup>76</sup> Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 245.

<sup>77</sup> Bassi, *Traces of the Past*, 200.

counterparts is somewhat compromised, then, by the presence of the interpreting subject in every hermeneutical act, an interposition that cannot, in the end, be evaded or escaped.<sup>78</sup> Arguments put forward for the “directness,” “reality,” or “durability” of artifacts as opposed to documents come across as a bid, then, to bypass the indeterminacies of interpretation that can emerge when brought to language and the absence within contemporary hermeneutical thought of some ground, metaphysical or otherwise, that would guarantee the meaning of archaeological phenomena separate from or previous to our handling of them. If ancient texts require sophisticated interpretive strategies to understand their “complex ideas and thoughts,”<sup>79</sup> the hope, it appears, is that material culture does not require the same.

But that it does is central to Ricoeur’s writings on the topic<sup>80</sup> and evident when reading the very different conclusions reached by archaeologists about the same remains.<sup>81</sup> Where the distinctions between words and things break down, accordingly, is that both depend on modes of interpretation to understand their historical significance, and that the interpretations produced are rendered, inevitably, through the language we use to convey them. “All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place” Gadamer writes, “in the interpreter’s own language.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, what Gadamer makes clear in the lengthy discussion of language that concludes *Truth and Method* is how it cannot be sidestepped in matters of interpretation, that language “always forestalls any objection to its jurisdiction”<sup>83</sup> because other possibilities of forming our interpretive insights are not available to us. So Julian Thomas, from an archaeological vantage point, observes how “language is the means by which

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<sup>78</sup> Even in Jones and Alberti’s rich discussion of the notion of “After Interpretation,” the shift to ontology, material agency, and posthumanism within their study is unable to dislodge the human subject from the results of archaeological analysis, where the move from “Interpreting Subject” to the “Relational Person” nevertheless finds the human individual as essential to the interpretive process. Jones and Albert, “After Interpretation,” 18–22.

<sup>79</sup> Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 168.

<sup>80</sup> “[. . .] like a text, human action is an open work,” Ricoeur writes in this vein, “the meaning of which is ‘in suspense’.” It is because it ‘opens up’ new references and receives fresh relevance from them, that human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations which decide their meaning.” Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text,” 170.

<sup>81</sup> On the disparate interpretations of early Iron Age Gezer, to cite one example, see the very different conclusions reached in W. Dever, “Gezer Revisited: New Excavations of the Solomonic and Assyrian Period Defenses,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 47 (1984), 206–18; D. Ussishkin, “Notes on Megiddo, Gezer, Ashdod, and Tel Batash in the Tenth to Ninth Centuries BC,” *BAJOR* 277–78 (1990), 71–91; and I. Finkelstein, “Gezer Visited and Revisited,” *TA* 29.2 (2002), 262–96.

<sup>82</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 390.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

the material world is revealed to us,” providing “the concepts at our disposal to comprehend them.”<sup>84</sup> Even for unwritten artifacts and the traces of past practices and activities preserved in the archaeological record, our interpretations of these phenomena cannot elude language and the texts that express them, bound, as we are, to an “understanding of the world” that is “always discursively constituted.”<sup>85</sup>

An attempt to accord interpretive priority to archaeological remains because they are perceived as a more direct witness into an ancient past cannot be sustained, then, since our understanding of these artifacts are always filtered through language, always mediated by way of how we converse and argue about their meanings.<sup>86</sup> There is nothing more immediate or straightforward about the interpretation of archaeological phenomena in contrast to texts, in short, because the interpretations of both are contingent on the language we use to articulate their significance. “The archaeologist’s duty requires him to replace his lost landscapes with words,” Emily Vermeule observes, so as “to convince others of the reality of what had been there.”<sup>87</sup> Archaeological interpretation, too, endeavors to persuade through the use of words since how we replace the lost landscapes of an ancient past is not obvious or inescapable, nor can it be reconstructed apart from the descriptions we offer. Things become words as soon as we attempt to elucidate their meanings, and a *punctum archimedis* by which to identify which collection of words are the single, definitive expression of a lost landscape is not ours to be had.

Nor is it ours when interpreting ancient texts. It is perhaps not surprising that historians have given much less thought to the interpretive relationship between words and things in light of the old logocentric bias found in past historical scholarship, and the relative

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<sup>84</sup> J. Thomas, “Reconfiguring the Social, Reconfiguring the Material,” in M. Shiffer (ed.), *Social Theory in Archaeology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), 154. Elsewhere, Thomas writes “any notion of a pre-discursive materiality is incomprehensible since we cannot articulate the pre-discursive other than in discursive concepts.” idem, *Archaeology and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 143.

<sup>85</sup> I. Morris, “Archaeology and Archaic Greek History,” in N. Fisher and H. van Wees (eds.), *Archaic Greece: New Approaches and New Evidence* (London: Duckworth, 1998), 5. So also Schloen writes, “These basic points of similarity between texts and action are not accidental but stem from the fact that human social action is always symbolically mediated and thus is *experienced in and through language.*” (my italics). Schloen, *House of the Father*, 24.

<sup>86</sup> Morris, too, writes of the temptation to see archaeological remains as “a transparent window onto the realities of the past, in contrast to slippery sources such as literature or ritual, which are full of distortion. *Nothing could be further from the truth.*” Morris, “Archaeology and Archaic Greek History,” 5 (my italics).

<sup>87</sup> Vermeule, “Archaeology and Philology,” 10.

infancy of the discipline of archaeology in comparison to it.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, historians are privy to centuries of internal debates within the realm of hermeneutics, aware of Friedrich Schleiermacher's early dictum that "misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course" when reading texts written in a world that is not ours,<sup>89</sup> and further appraised of a multitude of theories since Schleiermacher's time that attempt to respond to the challenges of interpretation that arise when encountering documents written in another age.<sup>90</sup>

Even a cursory survey of this trajectory of hermeneutical thought reveals how persistent is the theme that the interpretation of texts cannot bypasses our mediation of their meanings.<sup>91</sup> So Hayden White's (in)famous quip that in terms of the historian's work what is represented is "as much invented as found,"<sup>92</sup> invented, that is, by way of the interpretive strategies brought to bear on the congeries of data available so as to organize and structure the history one tells. Words of an ancient past are no more liberated from our intercession into their meanings than things, consequently, and no less. Nor are they less fragmentary. To return to Na'aman's observations, it is important to resist the contention that archaeological data is more fragmentary than written evidence, or more degraded and dependent on the contingencies of preservation. The textual sources we have from ancient Israel are also highly fragmentary and partial, both in terms of what is represented in the biblical writings and with regard to the epigraphic remains from the region. What historian today would not seek entry into an archive that preserved the lost "Book of Yashar" (Josh 10:13) or the "Chronicles of the Kings of Israel" (1 Kings 14:19)? Who would not restore the Tel Dan or Deir 'Alla inscriptions if the remaining fragments were suddenly available to us? And by what accidents of history do we have access to a mostly Judahite, Jerusalem-centric biblical corpus rather than a cache of documents produced by those who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel for its brief period of existence, or more extensive writings from those who occupied regions in the Transjordan?

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<sup>88</sup> Moreland, "Archaeology and Texts," 136–38; Martin "Words Alone," 321; T. Trautmann and C. Sinopoli, "In the Beginning Was the Word: Excavating the Relations between History and Archaeology in South Asia," in N. Yoffee and B. Crowell (eds.), *Excavating Asian History: Interdisciplinary Studies in Archaeology and History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 191–228.

<sup>89</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, A. Bowie (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1838]), 21–22.

<sup>90</sup> E.g., K. Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988); J. Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. J. Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>91</sup> On this mediation, see especially Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 299–306; Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 89–95.

<sup>92</sup> H. White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," *Clio* 3.3 (1974), 278.

What evidence we have of ancient Israel’s past is all partial and limited, fragmented by the millennia that have passed since these artifacts were first fashioned. What has endured only holds historical consequence, furthermore, by way of how we interpret the words and things available to us, one no more so than the other, the meanings of both never realized without our mediation of their significance and the language we use to express them. Regardless of whether we are investigating the ruins of an ancient site or the claims of an ancient text, the historical value of these items are brought to light by way of the questions we pose and the narratives we choose to tell.<sup>93</sup> What is required, then, are interpretive approaches that elevate neither words nor things within the hermeneutical process, but recognize both as invariably interpretive, inherently valuable.

### THE HISTORIAN AND THE ASSEMBLAGE

The challenge in conceiving of an interpretive framework that circumvents a “high court” by which to arbitrate ancient Israel’s past is the heterogeneous character of the evidence available. How to array the archaeological and textual sources that may pertain to ancient Israel’s history is complicated by the fact that these components do not fit neatly together, and, at moments, even resist one another. To configure the disparate evidence that would comprise this history is an endeavor hindered at the outset, consequently, by traces of an ancient past that have no natural or self-evident arrangement. The refusal to accord precedence to a particular collection of evidence (archaeological, textual) and then supplement it with secondary forms only makes the effort of formulating such an approach more difficult. But in contrast to approaches that would accredit a higher value to either texts or artifacts in matters of historical interpretation, that aim here is to sketch, if only in a tentative and preliminary way, the contours of how an alternative framework might be considered.

The starting point for this framework is the notion of an assemblage. What is immediately attractive about an assemblage is that it is constituted by distinct and varied elements that have no necessary relationships between them. That is, assemblages can be composed of widely divergent components whose associations with another are not innate but are rather established by factors external to the components themselves. An archaeological assemblage, for example, may consist of typologically distinct pottery forms, installments of various kinds whose functions ranged considerably in antiquity (benches, hearths, pedestals), foreign artifacts acquired by trade or conquest, and the residue of cooking or metallurgical activity, among many other elements, none of which have any intrinsic connections to one another other than being unearthed within a shared area and stratum. Yet what results from viewing these items within a single assemblage are historical insights that would not

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<sup>93</sup> See the “logic of question and answer,” in Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 362–82.

otherwise be achieved, attained through the careful examination of what these objects might mean, jointly, for the ancient individuals who were once active within a particular room or building or space. An assemblage establishes a matrix of interpretive relationships between components that would not exist without it, drawing our attention to how different traces from the past may relate to one another within a given arrangement.<sup>94</sup>

But the concept of assemblage can be broadened out further still to include other components, where the referential claims of texts, of the ideas and figures and former undertakings that documents can represent, are grouped alongside those material remains that have persisted from the past. These are what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as the “collective assemblage of enunciation,” or an assemblage of “acts and statements” located along the same continuum as that of materials and bodies and which function in dialectical tension with them in the interpretive process.<sup>95</sup> A more robust understanding of a historical assemblage would be comprised, from this perspective, of both words and things that are assembled together by virtue of their depositional and referential ties to a specific chronology and geography, or the “territory,” in the parlance of Deleuze and Guattari, which demarcates one assemblage from another.<sup>96</sup> Within such a framework, to return to Na’aman and Finkelstein’s discussion,<sup>97</sup> archaeological evidence pertaining to Iron IIA Jerusalem would be situated within an assemblage of—and not elevated above or beneath—written references that pertain to the location in spite of the very different forms these traces might assume (unwritten artifacts; brief epigraphs; contemporaneous written records from foreign locations; the curated, secondary sources of the Hebrew Bible) and absent any direct, demonstrable convergences between them.

That such varied components can be brought together without being expected to cohere or converge readily with one another is what gives this interpretive framework the suppleness it requires to respond to the disparate evidence we have from ancient Israel. What

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<sup>94</sup> C. Fowler, “Dynamic Assemblages, or the Past is What Endures: Change and the Duration of Relations,” in B. Alberti, A. Jones, and J. Pollard (eds.), *Archaeology After Interpretation: Returning Materials to Archaeological Theory* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 235–56; G. Lucas, *Understanding the Archaeological Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 193–214; Y. Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 126–28 and 178–80; Y. Hamilakis, and A. Jones, “Archaeology and Assemblage,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 27.1 (2017), 77–84.

<sup>95</sup> G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 [1980]), 88.

<sup>96</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88.

<sup>97</sup> Finkelstein, “Archaeology as a High Court,” 3; Na’aman, “Does Archaeology Really Deserve,” 169–70.

rarely comes to light within an assemblage, and what is therefore rarely sought, are direct correspondences between elements that can verify (or disprove) the historicity of a particular literary reference or provide the precise identification of some ancient object or practice.<sup>98</sup> Instead, by amassing a collection of artifacts and literary references that pertain to a particular era and region the historian is able to perceive what relationships, what arrangements, if any, might appear between numerous components that would otherwise not be viewed in concert with one another. “An assemblage,” Deleuze remarks, “is first and foremost what keeps very heterogeneous elements together,”<sup>99</sup> and it is precisely this capacity of an assemblage that affords the possibility of interpreting written and material traces collectively within a shared framework in a way that does not privilege certain elements over others. It is a hermeneutic that invites multiplicity and difference, solicitous of associations and affinities free from the desire for foundations.<sup>100</sup>

What is advantageous about an assemblage, then, is that its components are not related to one another on some predetermined basis. Rather, what appears within an assemblage are clusters or a density of elements that aggregate or disperse when specific historical questions are posed, thereby suggesting certain relationships or particular interpretations that are more plausible than their alternatives. When considering the character of Iron IIA Jerusalem, for example, the biblical references to this location as a populous and affluent city that occur at moments in the Book of Chronicles (1 Chr 15:1–16:6; 22; 28:1–29:22) are notable for being an obvious outlier among the assemblage of evidence we possess that pertains to this location, whether from archaeological excavations,<sup>101</sup> the absence of references to it among other ancient Near Eastern texts, or those passages in Samuel that would suggest a more modest highland site

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<sup>98</sup> So Martin writes of the need to resist “the old-style approach in which texts explained objects, objects confirmed texts, QED.” Martin, “Words Alone,” 324.

<sup>99</sup> G. Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*, trans. A. Hodges and M. Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 179.

<sup>100</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 8, 25.

<sup>101</sup> Y. Shiloh, *Excavations at the City of David*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1984), 16–7; M. Steiner, *Excavations by Kathleen Kenyon in Jerusalem, 1961–1967: vol. III, the Settlement in the Bronze and Iron Ages* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 42–53; J. Cahill “Jerusalem at the Time of the Monarchy: The Archaeological Evidence,” in A. Vaughn and A. Killebrew (eds.), *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 13–80; A. Mazar “Jerusalem in the 10th Century BCE: The Glass Half Full,” in Y. Amit et al. (eds.), *Essays on Ancient Israel in Its Near Eastern Context: A Tribute to Nadav Na’aman* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 255–72; A. De Groot and H. Bernick-Greenberg, *Excavations at the City of David 1978–1985 Directed by Yigal Shiloh. vol. VIIA. Area E: Stratigraphy and Architecture* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2012), 150–54.

(e.g., 2 Sam 5:6–9; 6:12–23).<sup>102</sup> Interpretive reasons for disputing the historical character of these specific references to Jerusalem, consequently, are not attributable to the biblical corpus or even the Book of Chronicles itself as being fundamentally ahistorical in its referential claims,<sup>103</sup> or that other types of evidence are always of more value than what such texts may provide. Rather, these specific biblical references are dubious, historically speaking, because they lack proximity to other forms of evidence within an assemblage of material and textual traces that pertain to this time period and place. In lieu of a method that accords one type of evidence implicit value over others, this framework evaluates referents on a case by case basis, exploring how they relate to a collection of other referents that are known to us.

What the concept of an assemblage affords, consequently, is an interpretive framework that is inclusive of words and things but which grants neither priority in matters of interpretation. Assemblages are dynamic, open-ended, and elastic, and it may be, if we

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<sup>102</sup> These passages are frequently cited by scholars as stemming from an earlier redactional phase of the Book of Samuel, previous to later Deuteronomistic reworkings (e.g., J. Grønbaek, *Die Geschichte vom Aufstieg Davids [1. Sam. 15–2. Sam. 5]: Tradition und Komposition* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971), 246–50; P.K. McCarter, *I Samuel* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 23–30; idem, *II Samuel* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 137; A. Fischer, *Von Hebron nach Jerusalem: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zur Erzählung von König David in II Sam 1–5* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 223, 227–243; R. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament*, trans. J. Bowden (London: New York, T&T Clark, 2005), 183–86; J. Hutton, *The Transjordanian Palimpsest: The Overwritten Texts of Personal Exile and Transformation in the Deuteronomistic History* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 113–56. Nevertheless, it is important to resist the idea that the temporal proximity of a text's composition to the events it narrates accords it greater historical value within the framework proposed here. More important are the literary seams and fissures that these studies identify, drawing out, as they do, how formerly independent anecdotes and stories were woven together over time.

<sup>103</sup> As a number of biblical scholars have argued, Chronicles may, at moments, provide references to an early Iron Age world that are of some historical significance in spite of these texts being written down centuries after the era in which their stories are set. See, for example, A. Vaughn, *Theology, History, and Archaeology in the Chronicler's Account of Hezekiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 170–82; A. Rainey, "The Chronicler and His Sources—Historical and Geographical," in M.P. Graham, K. Hoglund, and S. McKenzie (eds.), *The Chronicler as Historian* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 30–72. The point, as Ben Zvi notes, is that Chronicles "may or may not reflect historical events or at least, historical knowledge thought to be accurate—in the modern sense of the term—by the author and readers. If such is the case, then no critically controlled position concerning their historical accuracy can be taken without the support of independent evidence." E. Ben Zvi, *History, Literature, and Theology in the Book of Chronicles* (London: Equinox, 2006), 112, n. 11.

consider the extent of a Solomonic kingdom, that new finds unearthed in the future from Iron IIA strata of Jerusalem or elsewhere will suddenly alter our current assemblage of evidence and cluster instead around the biblical claims of a more expansive and powerful polity (1 Kgs 4:7–19; 2 Chr 8:1–11) than what we now consider this kingdom to have been.<sup>104</sup> Assemblages are never static, nor do they display a necessary hierarchy of value. When posing certain historical questions, the data that arrays together may be predominantly archaeological in nature, and for other queries ancient texts could be more pertinent and significant. But few are the historical concerns that can be addressed solely on the basis of one type of evidence alone. Even more rarefied historical topics that might favor the writings of priests or scholars from antiquity, such as perspectives into the workings of the divine realm, are given greater depth when situated with an assemblage of archaeological evidence (iconographic representations, the layout and position of sanctuaries, cultic installations and artifacts) that relate to these interests; considerations of foodways or trade, conversely, are likely to be made more perceptive when textual claims about dietary laws or ancient stories of cultural exchange are arranged with an assemblage of the archaeological remains of these activities.

On this view, what emerges through this interpretive approach are networks or constellations of relationships<sup>105</sup> and not a high court by which one form of evidence is employed to adjudicate the historical significance of those forms that fall outside of it. The components of an assemblage are manifold and there are few moments when one element is able to converge seamlessly with another single component, especially with the highly fragmented and differentiated evidence we possess from ancient Israel. But by viewing these traces within an assemblage we are offered a framework within which certain arrangements and a thickness of associations emerge in such a way as to draw our attention to them and allow us to make inferences on their basis. In place of an interpretive approach constructed on theories of correspondence between primary and secondary categories of evidence, what an assemblage offers are dialectical insights, triangulated through the

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<sup>104</sup> G. Knoppers, “The Vanishing Solomon: The Disappearance of the United Monarchy from Recent Histories of Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 116.1 (1997), 19–44; L. Stager, “The Patrimonial Kingdom of Solomon,” in W. G. Dever and S. Gitin (eds.), *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 63–74; M. Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, trans. C. Peri and P. Davies (London: Equinox, 2005), 96–101.

<sup>105</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, what forms within an assemblage is the famous image of the rhizome that begins their study, or relationships that emerge as bulbs and tubers, massifications and concretions. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1–7.

give and pull of the data available and the configurations that support certain historical conclusions over others.<sup>106</sup>

A further advantage of conceiving of an interpretive framework in terms of an assemblage, then, is that it recognizes the subjective influences that necessarily factor into all moments of historical analysis. If the “territory” of a historical assemblage, its geographic and chronological limits, is established by virtue of the depositional context and referential claims of its components, it is nevertheless the historian who groups these elements together and draws insights from the constellations of data that appear. In the work of Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages are always an active and intentional activity, frameworks that are “passional, they are compositions of desire,”<sup>107</sup> rather than some entity that simply appears apart from our efforts to construct it. An assemblage comes to be, that is, by the act of amassing disparate kinds of historical evidence together, and what interpretations are produced are those discerned by what the historian is able to observe. There is no assemblage without our making it so, a framework that cannot come into being “without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them.”<sup>108</sup>

The outcome of an interpretive framework modeled on the notion of an assemblage is something akin, to conclude, to what Carlo Ginzburg terms a form of “presumptive” knowledge, a knowledge constructed by way of a collection of clues pursued and solicited so as to generate a plausible interpretation of some past occurrence. In the famous essay on the “evidential paradigm,”<sup>109</sup> Ginzburg traces the historical development of this type of knowledge inferred from the vestiges that may be left behind from previous incidents, whether among ancient hunter-gatherers who studied the tracks of their quarry to the more refined analyses of Giovanni Morelli in his identification of lost paintings by Renaissance masters. It is here that a hermeneutics of assemblage finds a counterpart in the realm of epistemology, where Ginzburg, too, draws attention to how past incidents, absent the possibility of repeating them, “could be reconstructed only through traces, symptoms, and clues,”<sup>110</sup> a “deciphering of *signs of various kinds*, from symptoms to writings”<sup>111</sup> that “per-

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<sup>106</sup> So also Halpern and Schloen similarly draw attention to the necessity of dialectical reasoning within a historical interpretive framework that takes into account both texts and artifacts, what Halpern terms, in fact, “an endless dialectic” between the two. Halpern, “Text and Artifact,” 340; Schloen, *House of the Father*, 7–28.

<sup>107</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 399.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> C. Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. J. Tedeschi and A. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 96–125.

<sup>110</sup> Ginzburg, “Clues,” 104.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 105. My italics.

mit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality.”<sup>112</sup> What matters about these clues, these often “infinitesimal traces,”<sup>113</sup> Ginzburg comments, is not their type, but instead how they are interpreted together in order to infer how some past may have occurred.

This form of knowledge is something distinct, Ginzburg observes further, from the “Galilean” paradigm that took hold of the natural sciences by the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. Opposed to the physicist who is able to repeat experiments and thereby confirm those hypotheses put forward, Ginzburg writes that historical knowledge acquired through an assemblage of traces is always “indirect, presumptive, conjectural,”<sup>114</sup> a knowledge based on the inferences the historian makes rather than through the demonstration of its accuracy through the recurrence of some procedure. It is, in short, a form of knowledge that recognizes its contingent and provisional character, aware that our understanding the past is “uncertain, discontinuous, lacunar, based only on fragments and ruins.”<sup>115</sup> But by virtue of such knowledge ancient hunters could “reconstruct the appearance of an animal on which they have never laid eyes,”<sup>116</sup> Ginzburg comments, and it could be demonstrated that an inscribed tablet, referring to certain repairs made to Solomon’s temple, was actually a modern forgery introduced to draw considerable funds from those who might be deceived of its authenticity.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>115</sup> C. Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, trans. J. Tedeschi and A. Tedeschi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 24.

<sup>116</sup> Ginzburg, “Clues,” 102.

<sup>117</sup> F. Moore Cross, “Notes on the Forged Plaque Recording Repairs to the Temple,” *IEJ* 53 (2003), 119–23; I. Eph’al, “The ‘Jehoash Inscription’: A Forgery,” *IEJ* 53 (2003), 123–28.