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**PHILIP R. DAVIES, THE ORIGIN OF BIBLICAL  
ISRAEL**

## THE ORIGIN OF BIBLICAL ISRAEL

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### I.

The most important development in recent years in the study of the history of ancient Israel and Judah has been, in my opinion, the interest in Judah during the Neo-Babylonian period, a period previously somewhat neglected, and strangely so, since it offers the most peculiar anomaly: for the entire period, a province called 'Judah' was in fact governed from a territory that, as the Bible and biblical historians themselves would describe it, was 'Benjamin'. The former capital of the kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem, was replaced by Mizpah. In the majority of modern histories of Israel/Judah that I have consulted, no explanation is offered for this choice.

How long this state of affairs continued remains unclear: the narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah are silent about this (as they are

confused about the rebuilding of the Temple), and, as Edelman has recently argued (Edelman 2005), Jerusalem was probably not restored as the capital of Judah until the middle of the 5th century at the earliest (indeed, if Jerusalem had been the capital before the time of Artaxerxes, the story of Nehemiah would be largely pointless!).

Thus, for well over a century, the political life of Judah was centred in a territory which had once been part of the kingdom of Israel. How, when and why it became attached to Judah is unknown. The claim in 1 Kings 12:16-21 that Benjamin sided with Judah when the 'kingdom' was 'divided' is hardly to be taken as reliable. If, when the Assyrians divided the territory of the former kingdom of Israel into provinces, the territory we know as 'Benjamin' was allocated to Assyria's vassal Judah, it seems not to have been involved in the campaign of Sennacherib—or had it been, it would have probably been removed from Judah. Perhaps it was annexed by Josiah: but if so, why would it not have been reclaimed by Egypt or by Babylon after his death?). The reign of Manasseh looks more probable, given the favourable relations between him and Assyria.

## II.

But this territory—the most densely populated part of the Neo-Babylonian province—was the focus of not only political but also religious life in Judah. Whether or not the remains of the

Jerusalem temple continued as a site of religious activity,<sup>1</sup> such activity would not have involved those inhabitants of the territory of Benjamin, who had their own sanctuaries. Despite the rhetoric about the centrality and uniqueness of Jerusalem in Judah's literature, we cannot take it as a historical fact that Jerusalem was the only sanctuary active in the territory of Judah-and-Benjamin prior to the Neo-Babylonian period. Thus, Mizpah itself (Tell en-Nasbeh; Zorn 2003), Bethel (Beitin; Kelso 1968) and Gibeon (el-Jib; Edelman 2003), to name three, presumably continued during the 6th and much of the 5th century as active cult centres; the archaeological evidence (usually rather poorly retrieved and reported) supports this conclusion, despite, in some cases, earlier opinions to the contrary.

Blenkinsopp (2003) has argued that of these, Bethel was pre-eminent. In the first place, if the tradition of 2 Kings is correct, it has been a royal sanctuary during the existence of the kingdom of Israel. Second, another biblical tradition associates it with Jacob, the eponymous ancestor of Israel. Thirdly, the polemic in the Judean scriptural canon against Bethel in 1 Kings 12–13; 2 Kings 23; Amos *passim* points to it having been the chief rival to Jerusalem, as its geographical locations would in any cases suggest. Anti-Benjaminite (including anti-Saulide) sentiment in the so-called 'Deuteronomistic history' is also evident, perhaps emanating from the sixth-fifth centuries. In particular the stories associated with the

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<sup>1</sup> As sometimes inferred from Jeremiah 41:4-8; but see Blenkinsopp 2003: 98.

transfer of the ark, and the golden calf episode (connected with the legend of Josiah's destruction of Bethel), show that Bethel-Jerusalem rivalry constituted a major issue in the production of much of the material in Judean literature. This, it has been argued, may have its roots in the sixth century (Amit 2003), but must have achieved its literary expression in the period when Jerusalem reasserted its supremacy over Bethel (religiously) as well as over Mizpeh (politically).

### III.

As already said, these observations represent nothing new or original: they are essentially a summary of recent conclusions. My own contribution consists in exploring an important implication of these conclusions, starting from the fact that for over a century the most influential *sanctuary* in the province of Judah was almost certainly Bethel. Its connection with Jacob probably emerged during the period of the kingdom of Israel in connection with its status (or as the reason, if the connection is even earlier) as one of the two royal sanctuaries. The association of Jacob with Esau in the Jacob cycle, however, is perhaps not so old, because while Esau himself is possibly a figure from an earlier period, his identification with Edom in any case surely belongs to the Neo-Babylonian or early Persian period, when Edom was the immediate neighbour of the territory, and not when it was relatively remotely located beyond the Rift Valley to the southeast. The association of Israel and Edom in fact obliterates the name of 'Judah' from the territory

of southern central Palestine. I will argue presently that the 'Jacob' of the cycle as a whole possibly *includes* Judah as his descendant.

Although anti-Benjaminite (and anti-'northern') ideology can be found throughout the Judean canonical writings (though largely absent from the Pentateuch), pointing to a specific rivalry that requires a concrete setting, we can also suggest in some cases a substratum of Benjaminite material. There are grounds for concluding, as I have argued elsewhere (Davies, forthcoming) that the *literati* of Benjamin originated the skeleton of an account of the rise of the kingdom of Israel, beginning with a conquest of the territory by Benjamin, a sequence of 'judges' initiated by a Benjaminite, and how Benjamin finally provided the first king of Israel (no verdict on the historicity of all this is implied). Again, whether this account crystallized specifically in the Neo-Babylonian and early Persian period is difficult to establish, but the people of Benjamin perhaps had no great love of Judah, and supported the Babylonians during their hegemony of Judah (Blenkinsopp 2003; Davies forthcoming). They perhaps thought of themselves as the rump of 'Israel', an identity nurtured and sustained by the cult at Bethel, even after the *Anschluss*, whenever that occurred, and now, in a kind of reversed *Anschluss*, had the opportunity either to incorporate (or exclude) Judah in their own history. Was it to overturn such a chauvinistic Benjaminite, 'history of Israel' that the books of the 'Deuteronomistic History' were in fact composed?

Certainly, in a sense, there existed a period of over a century in which Judah *was* really 'Israel', and this context to my mind offers the solution to one of the fundamental problems of biblical studies: why did Judeans subsequently call themselves by the name 'Israel'?

#### IV.

Until fairly recently, this problem was not seen as a problem because it was already answered; there had been a United Monarchy bearing the name Israel, in which Judah and Jerusalem were pre-eminent. But that assertion can no longer be made as a historical fact: on the contrary, it is counter-indicated by the archaeological evidence. (That same evidence has also finally removed any suggestion of an ethnic entity prior to settlement in the highlands at the very end of the Late Bronze age.) When, then, did Judah *come to see itself* as part of 'Israel'? Perhaps at a time when the kingdom of Israel effectively linked the two kingdoms, under a single king Jehoram (2 Kings 3:1-2, 8:16, where the fact is possibly disguised by inventing a second Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, and perhaps in a separate, later editorial process changing 'Jehoram' to 'Joram' for the king of Israel)? Whether or not there was at this time a period of political union, or even merely political collusion (as also narrated in 2 Kings under Jehoshaphat), the circumstances seem to have been short-lived. Judah pursued its own political career as independently of Israel as possible, and indeed, against Israel's interests, by allying itself to Assyria. It seems unlikely, then,

that we have here any plausible basis for the continued adoption of the name 'Israel' by Judah, if the name had ever been attached to the population.

The reign of Hezekiah is frequently cited as a time when Jerusalem was swollen with Israelite refugees and when 'northern' influence might have been brought to bear on Judah. However, the undoubted expansion of the city is as well attributable to an influx of refugees from the Judean countryside or other Judean cities, and there is no positive evidence of a population move from Samerina to Judah. Even if such a move had taken place, this new population element from the north could hardly have imposed its name on its new host, and would hardly have been adopted voluntarily.

Another possibility is the reign of Josiah. The current theory of Josiah's expansion posits a *recapture* of territory claimed by Judah as part of the same political-religious entity, and as such implies a previous union that I have suggested did not occur. His reported destruction of Bethel may, of course, be a legendary retrojection to justify Bethel's replacement by Jerusalem at a later time. But equally an attack on Bethel might have been undertaken by Josiah, since something is needed to explain his execution, if that is how he died. But in any case, one cannot see why a move by Josiah to annex Benjamin would result in the adoption of the name 'Israel' by Judah rather than the reverse (in fact, Bethel was probably part of Judean territory at this time in any case; see above).



## V.

Fundamentally, the reason why all these traditional alternatives fail is that they suppose a situation in which Judah is the stronger partner and thus unlikely to assume the name of the weaker. We are obliged, on the contrary, to look for a period when 'Israel' was dominant and 'Judah' subordinate, and a period of time in which an identity 'Israel' could be absorbed by a population that also saw itself as 'Judah' in such a way that it was irreversible. However, we do not need to look specifically for a *political* definition of 'Israel', since when it is defined so as to include Judah (especially the Pentateuch) rather than when referring to the kingdom that bore the name (especially Samuel and Kings), 'Israel' is used in a primarily *religious* (including ethnic) sense, not a political one. This accords well with its usage in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. The 'all-Israel' political entity is part of an invented history that seeks, among other things, to undergird the integration of Judah into Israel (and of course deny Samaria any continuing claim in this entity). But it has its origin in the spread throughout much of Judah of the name 'Israel' in a religious sense, deriving from the Bethel cult.

Addressed as 'children of Jacob' (or rather more simply, just 'Jacob') and induced to venerate him as their ancestor, worshippers at Bethel identified themselves as 'Israel'; and while before 722 this identity coincided also with the kingdom in which Bethel was a royal sanctuary, this identity thereafter persisted more as a religious

term (though probably without losing its ethnic connotation for Benjaminites). While Bethel may have attracted some Judeans into its orbit even before 586, it made a serious impact only after the demise of its rival Jerusalem. With the Jerusalem royal house and aristocracy removed, Judeans had no institutional support for any 'traditions' of 'Zion' or of 'house of David'. In a period of over a century, spanning at least four generations, the identity 'Israel' could very easily permeate the population of 'Benjamin-Judah' in such a way that the later restoration of political and cultic supremacy to Jerusalem could not challenge it, let alone remove it. But with the reestablishment of Jerusalem, Bethel was defamed and destroyed; 'Israelite' stories were revised and overlaid with Judean ones, and (if Blenkinsopp [1998] is correct) its Aaronite priesthood was transferred to Jerusalem, thus relocating the religious centre of Jacob/Israel to the 'city of David'. The name 'Israel' was thus retained and redefined: 'biblical Israel' was invented, with Judah at its head.

## VI.

It remains to consider whether the merging of Judah and Israel (or specifically 'Jacob') can be traced in datable Judean literature. We can begin with texts such as Isaiah 2:3:

And many people will go and say, 'Come let us go up to the mountain of Yhwh, to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and

the word of Yhwh from Jerusalem’.

‘Jacob’ occurs at least 40 times in Isaiah, but is especially concentrated in chapters 40–55 (22 times). This is a totally unexpected phenomenon in a poet supposedly exiled among Zionists and addressing them (I use the term precisely: the ‘exile’ was a deportation of Jerusalemites, whose descendants presumably were responsible for supporting the restoration of their beloved city):

Hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and have come out of the waters of Judah, who swear by the name of Yhwh, and make mention of the god of Israel, but not in truth, nor in righteousness (Isa 48:1)

I have argued before (Davies 1995: see also Barstad 1989, 1997) that the contents of Second Isaiah stem largely if not entirely from Judah in the fifth century, when the issue of Jerusalem’s claims and the claims of its ‘children’ were being advanced in a way that did not, as in Ezra and Nehemiah, seek to exclude the indigenous population. For this poet, the returning Zionists (to whom he is sympathetic, if not even one himself) are part of ‘Israel’; they are ‘Jacob’ and should be welcomed.

The usage recurs in Trito-Isaiah: “And I will bring forth a seed out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor of my mountains: and my elect shall inherit it, and my servants shall live there” (Isa 65:9).

The usage is also found in Jeremiah; for example, “Declare this in the house of Jacob, and publish it in Judah ...” (Jer. 5:20)

Are these two terms synonymous? Or is ‘house of Jacob’ a reference to Benjamin, the rump of Israel? McKane (1986) prefers the former: “The form of address in v. 20 is new, but *בית יעקב* almost certainly functions as a synonym of *יהודה* and is not a reference to the northern kingdom’. This seems to me also more plausible: in 30:10, 31:7, 11; 33:26; 46:27-8, ‘Jacob’ apparently refers to Judeans (2:4; 10:16, 25 cannot be decided). It is surprising that such language has not attracted more comment from commentators. Does the collocation date from the late Judean monarchy, or reflect a later period when which the book was assuming its canonical forms?

A similar collocation in Lamentations fits the proposed period very well:

Yhwh has swallowed up all the habitations of Jacob, and has not shown pity: he has thrown down in his wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought them down to the ground: he has polluted the kingdom and its princes. He has cut off in his fierce anger all the horn of Israel: he has drawn back his right hand from before the enemy, and he burned against Jacob like a flaming fire, that devours round about (Lam. 2:2-3)

See also Lam. 17 where Jacob is collocated with Jerusalem:

In the two collocations of Jacob and Judah in Hosea, on the other hand, the terms are not synonymous: 'Judah' and 'Jacob' apply to different entities:

And Ephraim is like a heifer that is trained, and loves to tread out the corn; and I put a yoke upon her fair neck: I will harness Ephraim; Judah shall plough, and Jacob shall break up the ground (Hos. 10:11).

Yhwh has also a dispute with Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; according to his doings will he recompense him. (Hos. 12:2)

The same is true of the last collocation, in Micah 1:5:

All this is because of Jacob's rebellion, and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? is it not Samaria? and what are the high places of Judah? are they not Jerusalem?

Here, for reasons that it would be interesting to explore (they might be statements from the monarchic period or from a post-monarchic period, serving to distinguish Samaritans from Judeans as faithful 'Israelites'), the Deuteronomistic distinction of 'Israel' and 'Judah' is preserved: but this usage of 'Jacob' is definitely not Deuteronomistic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The only usage in this literature that refers to a distinct body of people is 2 Kings 17:34: "To this day they continue to practise their

**VII.**

In this very brief paper I do not have the scope to examine any further the textual evidence of the identification of 'Judah' as 'Jacob', as opposed to 'Judah' and 'Jacob' as pairs. I hope to finish a more detailed presentation of this thesis in the near future. I have here only outlined my answer to the problem of the origin of 'biblical Israel'. The implications of the answer for the history of biblical traditions are considerable and will of course have to be addressed: the antiquity or otherwise of the tribal system in particular, the invention of the 'united monarchy' and the functions of David and Solomon as historiographical and literary figures; the true nature of relations between the populations of Judah and Samaria in the Persian period, and the place of Benjamin between these. Also of some importance is the role of the conflict between Benjaminite and Judean religious traditions (whether real or invented) and the origin of the Judean scriptures themselves. For the historical roots of 'biblical Israel' in the religious discourse and practice of the sixth and fifth centuries may hold the key to the burst of Judean literary activity that laid the basis of the canon we know call the 'Hebrew Bible'.

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former customs. They do not worship Yhwh and they do not follow the statutes or the ordinances or the law or the commandment that Yhwh commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel'. Is 'Israel' here meant to refer to the kingdom or to the 'biblical Israel'—or is it deliberately ambiguous?

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