This book provides an excellent introductory overview of issues and interpretations in the archaeology and history of the southern Levant, authored by two of Israel’s leading figures in the field of Bronze and Iron Age archaeology, Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar. There is a short introduction and useful assessment summaries for five out of six parts of the volume, written by Brian Schmidt, a Hebrew Bible scholar. The book is well structured, following a two-page introduction by Schmidt is “Part 1: Archaeology and the Quest for Historical Israel in the Hebrew Bible,” an overview of the history of the fields of Hebrew Bible studies and archaeology of the region. This is followed by “Part 2: Using Archaeology to Assess the Bible’s Traditions about ‘The Earliest Times’”; “Part 3: The Historical Origins of Collective Israel”; “Part 4: The Tenth Century: The New Litmus Test for the Bible’s Historical Relevance”; “Part 5: On More Secure Ground: The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Iron II Period”; and “Part 6: So What? Implications for Scholars and Communities.” These sections are largely laid out in chronological order from the Middle Bronze Age through the end of the late Iron Age (ca. 1550-586 BCE), the archaeological periods traditionally linked to the biblical periods of the Patriarchs/Matriarchs through the time of Exile, followed by a concluding section. The first five Parts to the volume begin with a “summary assessment” by Schmidt, followed by an essay by Finkelstein and one by Mazar on the given topic or theme. Part 6 presents conclusions by Finkelstein and Mazar. The volume contains ten illustrations, an overview bibliography corresponding to the varied chapters, a subject index, and index to cited biblical passages.

While the book is designed for interested lay audiences and undergraduate students given its synthetic nature and readability, newcomers may find themselves confused at times because of the disagreements between Finkelstein and Mazar over some very basic issues. In general, the summary assessments by Schmidt are meant to reconcile these disagreements. In numerous ways, this book represents many of the pluses and minuses in our particular sub-field of archaeology, whether one wants to call it Biblical Archaeology, Syro-Palestinian Archaeology, or the Archaeology of the Southern Levant. In general, regardless of period from the Middle Bronze Age through the end of the Iron II, the questions that are posed to the archaeological remains are typically framed by historical-cultural or biblical issues. The very title of the book, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, reveals this with its clear focus on history.

In general the type of history that is presented throughout the volume is a modified kind of political, or short-term history. Such history is reflective of the lives and deeds of the elite of ancient societies, which is no surprise since typically it was the elite who were vested in the writing and preservation of texts (biblical or ancient Near Eastern) on which we base our historical reconstructions. Unfortunately, this is the kind of
history or historical inquiry that rarely can find answers from archaeology or the study of material culture. In general, archaeological inquiry is much better at approaching questions related to mid- and long-range types of history: social, economic, religious, technological, environmental, and agricultural, to name a few.

Thus a question like “when was the historic period of the patriarchs and matriarchs” is almost impossible to pin down not only because of the nature of the stories and texts preserved in the Hebrew Bible and the history of their oral and written formation, transmission, and editing but also because there is no archaeological evidence that can be read or interpreted as saying “Abraham and Sarah were here.” However, archaeological and ethno-archaeological investigations into pastoral-nomadic groups might help us to better understand Patriarchal/Matriarchal social organization, religious practices, foodways, herding and economic strategies; what they do not really help are questions like whether these characters in Genesis may or may not have lived in which era.

An important question is whether a settlement from the Iron I period, the archaeological period typically associated with the biblical period of Judges, should be considered Israelite, Proto-Israelite, or Canaanite. It was during this transitional period that the perceived differences between early Israel and Canaan were in the process of being defined and enforced (ethnogenesis), and may relate more to a rural/urban dichotomy, with early Israel centered around in highland agricultural villages and contemporary Canaanite culture persisting in cities along the central and northern coastal plains, inland valleys, and in highland urban centers like Shechem, Jerusalem, and Hebron. In a more focused example, after over a century of archaeological excavations in the southern Levant, we still cannot prove the existence of a King Solomon from extra-biblical sources, nor can archaeology pinpoint with certainty his building activities in the material record. However, the archaeology of the Iron IIA period (traditionally linked with the time of the United Monarchy), while regrettably meager, is typified by newly founded monumental architecture or public works programs in the form of city walls and gates, palace and administrative buildings, and stables, along with a region-wide standardization of ceramics, increased interregional and international commerce, and in general an increase in population. All of these are archaeological hallmarks of centralized rule of an early state, even if they do not provide the names of the rulers responsible for founding and bolstering this fledgling kingdom.

Interested lay audiences and undergraduate students will find this volume a welcomed introduction to current debates in the fields of southern Levantine (biblical) archaeology, Israelite history, and Hebrew Bible studies. Finkelstein and Mazar have presented their own synthesized interpretive views on a range of archaeological periods and issues, written in a highly readable fashion and framed by cogent summary assessments of Brian Schmidt. Finkelstein and Mazar summarize the cultural/historical approach typical of Bronze and Iron Age archaeology in Israel. This cultural/historical (biblical) mode of interpretation is slowly shifting to an anthropologically based line of inquiry, with greater focus on questions of society, economy, religion, technology,