
The author’s earlier work, In Search of ‘Ancient Israel,’ correctly distinguished three Israels: (1) the Israel of the biblical text (literary); (2) the Israel composed of the populace of the Palestinian highlands in the Iron Age (actual historical); and (3) the “ancient Israel” confusedly constructed by biblical historians out of an unprincipled combination of the first two Israels (allegedly historical, actually heavily theological).

In the present work, Davies aims to characterize and explain how the biblical traditions arose by tackling an abiding conundrum in biblical studies: “Why did Judeans call themselves ‘Israel’?” (1). Considering (1) Israel and Judah were separate kingdoms often at odds, even in open conflict; and (2) the collapse of Israel as a political entity, why would the ongoing kingdom of Judah and its populace want to identify itself as Israel?

The long-standing answer to that question has been that there existed, prior to the division into two kingdoms, a united monarchy, and before that, an association of tribes known as Israel. Thus, it seems no surprise that later Judah would choose to employ Israel as an honorific title and an affirmation of its continuity with the kingdom of David, seen as the united kingdom of Israel. Although containing difficulties of its own, this hypothesis, in one version or another, was sufficient to satisfy most biblical scholars. And, while mistaken in its traditional form, a rooting of the terminology at the earliest stages of these Yahweh-worshiping people has merit, as I will note below.

What has unsettled the status quo on this issue are the rising doubts that we may properly speak of the existence of a united kingdom called Israel or of a preceding association of tribes with the same name. This amounts to claiming that only with the existence of the initially separate kingdoms of Judah and Israel do we have reliable information about groups within the Palestinian populace who used those names to identify themselves. With such an assumption, it remains curious in the extreme that a surviving polity (Judah) would choose to adopt the name of an expiring polity (Israel) with which it had been in conflict for two centuries.

Working with this enigma, Davies offers the intriguing suggestion that it was Benjamin, sometimes seen as belonging to Israel and sometimes to Judah, that was the transmitter of Israelite tradition from north to south at the fall of Jerusalem. The Benjaminite institutional bridge was supplied by (1) Mizpah as the newly appointed neo-Babylonian administrative center of the territory of Judah, including Benjamin; and (2) Bethel as the center of a religious cult devoted to the God of Jacob (i.e. Israel). Davies notes that, so far as we can tell, Mizpah remained the political capital of Judah for more than a century until Persia reinstated Jerusalem in that role. During that period, the identity of Israel as the religious community devoted to the God of Jacob spread throughout Judah and became a virtual synonym for Judah and its worship of Yahweh.
Among the Israelite traditions transmitted to Judah at this time was a history of Benjamin that later Judahite scribes took over and incorporated into a wider framework that subordinated Benjamin to Judahite hegemony, often in a highly judgmental fashion. This Benjaminite history is preserved here and there in the conquest traditions of Joshua and Judges and in the account of a territorially restricted kingdom of Saul which the text now interprets as the rule of an apostate king over a much larger kingdom who was replaced by the pious David. The present state of the traditions, with Benjamin/Bethel versus Judah/Jerusalem uneasily placed side by side as rival regions and holy sites, is due to the Judahite scribes who used the Benjaminite materials, all the while making sure that they were subsumed under Judahite preeminence. As a result, the frequent use of Israel, sometimes as antagonistic to Judah and sometimes as a virtual synonym for Judah, creates much confusion throughout the Pentateuch, the Former and Latter Prophets, and Chronicles.

This tangled history of shifting usages of Israel as a group identifier, together with the detailed and sophisticated methodology of Davies, make it difficult to summarize his argument without including aspects that he would consider essential evidence for a full defense of his position, such as his critical scrutiny of recent studies of the Bethel traditions and his novel reading of the book of Jeremiah. Suffice it to say that Davies’ hypothesis will undoubtedly stand as one of the principal proposals for solving the puzzling Israel=Judah terminological equation.

To be sure, Davies’ entire hypothesis is closely linked to the assumption that the biblical traditions owe their shape, and the greater part of their content, to sixth and fifth-century Judahite scribes. These scribes worked with “cultural memories” that permit only minimal credibility to traditions about monarchic Israel and Judah, and virtually no credibility to the traditions of conquest, judges, and united monarchy. Most scholars today concur that the scope and opulence of the united monarchy has been greatly exaggerated in biblical traditions, but this is not equivalent to a total denial of an incipient state which eventually broke apart because it could not hold together the contending tribal and regional components that it attempted to control (cf. Christa Schaefer-Lichtenberger’s essay in The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States, ed. V. Fritz and P. R. Davies, 1996, pp. 78-105). Moreover, expunging the premonarchic era from the sources for understanding later Israel and Judah ignores the archaeology and extrabiblical texts that offer a congruent context for Israel’s emergence as a pre-state formation. That this peasant coalition carried the name Israel is attested both by the Merneptah stele and early biblical texts such as the Song of Deborah.

That being said, it is conceivable that positing the beginning of Israel in a loose coalition of tribes is consistent with at least some aspects of Davies’ reconstruction of the fortunes of the Israel-versus-Judah dichotomy and their final convergence after 586 BCE. It is widely recognized that Judah stood apart from the northern tribes from the outset and did not join with them until a short time before the emergence of the state. Yet the association of Judah and the northern tribes was a stormy one, such that the incipient state was torn by a struggle between Benjaminite and Judahite claims to leadership as witnessed in the aspirations of Saul and David. That Judah won