Bene Israel: Studies in the Archaeology of Israel and the Levant During the Bronze and Iron Ages in Honour of Israel Finkelstein


Israel Finkelstein, without a doubt, is one of the leading scholars in the field of Levantine archaeology, especially biblical archaeology. Finkelstein is known mostly thanks to his vocal criticism against reading the Bible as historical fact, his lowering of the chronology of Megiddo, and for his argument that biblical kings such as Solomon were, in fact, merely local chieftains whose deeds were greatly embellished and written down only centuries later. The book under review here, however, is not a tribute to Finkelstein the scholar, but to Finkelstein the teacher. Comprised of 12 contributions from his former students at (primarily) Tel Aviv University, the book covers a wide array of subjects, such as Bronze and Iron Age chronology, stylistic peculiarities of the well-known Philistine “Orpheus Jug,” the use of land, settlement distribution, state formation, and socioeconomic aspects of life in the Bronze and Iron Age Levant.

Though most of the authors of Bene Israel, following their teacher’s example, have focused their research on the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age archaeology of Israel and the Levant, this has not resulted in a dull repetition of known facts and general statements. Indeed, as the editors of the volume note, it is clear that some of Finkelstein’s former students adhere to totally different views on matters such as chronology. The most striking example in this respect is Meitlis (“A Re-Analysis of the Archaeological Evidence for the Beginning of the Iron Age I”), who does not just reject Finkelstein’s low chronology, but argues for the inception of the Iron Age (or at least its distinctive cultural assemblage) in the Canaanite highlands during the 14th century (106–10), thus proposing an extremely high chronology. Meitlis’ hypothesis appears to be based on two arguments. The first is the occurrence of Late Bronze Age material (such as Cypriote Bronze Age artifacts and Mycenaean pottery) at Iron Age sites that have no Bronze Age antecedents (such as Mt. Ebal). The second argument pertains to the presence of Late Bronze Age artifacts at sites destroyed early in the Late Bronze Age and only reoccupied during the Iron Age. (A striking example is Tel Ta’anach. The settlement was destroyed in the 15th century B.C.E. and appears to have remained uninhabited until the Iron Age, yet excavators did find Mycenaean IIIA2 vessels at the site). Though one could, perhaps, explain the Bronze Age material at these sites as “heirlooms” (an option curiously not mentioned), Meitlis’ revision of the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age chronology may receive some support from 14C analysis of carbonized wood from Tel Dan, where a number of carbon samples from Iron Age strata have been dated to the 14th and 13th centuries B.C.E.

Another contributor who rejects the current archaeological communis opinio (though arguably not as dramatically as Meitlis) is Arie. Arie evaluates the use of the southeastern slope of the tell of Megiddo during the Middle Bronze Age. While this part of the tell appears to
have been used as a cemetery during Middle Bronze I, and the absence of any significant remains of architecture has always been taken as evidence for the view that the area remained uninhabited during the entire Middle Bronze Age. Arie argues that the area was, in fact, an extramural neighborhood of the expanding city during Middle Bronze II and III. The burials that were found in the region could, Arie argues, be best interpreted in light of the practice of burying the dead under the floors of buildings and courtyards—a practice well attested elsewhere in the Bronze Age Levant. If true, Arie’s reconstruction of an extramural residential area would significantly increase Megiddo’s reconstructed territorial extent to a total of 13.5 ha.

It is impossible to dwell on each contribution to *Bene Israel* here. Suffice to say that the volume offers a fascinating array of in-depth studies of various aspects of Levantine/Canaanite Bronze and Iron Age archaeology. As noted above, the 12 authors cover a wide range of subjects and periods. Though this makes for an interesting and varied read, there is also a disadvantage. This reader found it, on occasion, hard to come to grips with the sometimes overwhelming array of details, insights, and controversies. (It does not help that there is no clear coherence between the various contributions other than the limited geographical scope and the authors’ common past as Finkelstein’s students.) Despite the assertion on the Web site of the volume’s publishing house that the book should be of interest to “all those interested in archaeology and history of the Land of Israel during the Bronze and Iron Ages, as well as Biblical scholars” (http://www.brill.nl/default.aspx?partid=210&pid=22298), this book is clearly not primarily meant for those with a general interest in Levantine archaeology, but rather for specialists in the field. The book is well produced; this reader noted no significant typographical mistakes, and illustrations are generally of high quality, though some are too small to allow for clear detail.

In conclusion, *Bene Israel* offers an interesting collection of studies in various aspects of Levantine/biblical archaeology. A fascinating read, it is as much a testimony to the qualities of Finkelstein the teacher, as to its 12 contributors.

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