Jews and Muslims in the Arab World

Haunted by Pasts Real and Imagined

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Long before the biblical canon was fixed—at the latest in the first or second century C.E.—segments of Hebrew scripture had already achieved sublime status among God’s chosen people. The patriarchal narratives, the exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, the conquest of Canaan, and the rise and fall of the monarchy, were all part of recorded “Jewish” experience generations before there was a universally recognized Bible. Together with later rabbinical commentary, these early and imaginative renderings of biblical Israel remained firmly imprinted on the historical imagination of Jews, both Jews who studied the textual tradition or acquired knowledge of it through the telling and retelling of familiar tales. In effect, the received story of the biblical Israelites became the foundation of an evolving Jewish master narrative for some two and a half thousand years.

The emergence of modern biblical studies in the nineteenth century, particularly the branch of scholarship that became known as higher biblical criticism, challenged orthodox views. The extended narrative whose didactic message shaped the very core of Jewish thinking and behavior could no longer be accepted as it had been, at least not by Jews fully embracing the modern world. The claim that the ancient editors recovered all of God’s revelation and produced a biblical text whose individual segments were seamless strained credulity. In light of philological and stylistic analyses made possible by the recovery of long-lost Near Eastern languages and literatures, a much-revered Hebrew scripture came to be viewed as a pastiche of different traditions, each the literary creation of its own time and place. Jews familiar with modern European historiography also became aware that the biblical authors did not represent history as it was, but, more likely, as it should have been. Reflective Jews, including many who remained devout, concluded that the biblical text can and indeed should be interpreted...
outside its literal meaning and the religiously driven interpretations to which it gave rise. Those who considered themselves intellectually sophisticated were inclined to situate the Hebrew Bible within a broad Near Eastern setting and see it as a composite work of great literary inventiveness, linguistic complexity, and editorial ingenuity. Only the most reverent and tradition-bound among the faithful denied altogether the hermeneutic value of modern biblical scholarship.

Still, the Hebrew Bible remained the supreme monument of Jewish civilization and the fulcrum of Jewish identity. In that respect, at least, little changed with the advent of higher biblical criticism. For proud Jews, modern scholarship has not compromised the emotive power of Israel’s foundational lore. Readers drawn by the transcendent force of the biblical story and its postbiblical permutations include Jews of secular outlook. The State of Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, whose lifestyle was thoroughly secular, read the Hebrew Bible with reverence. For Ben Gurion and many of the secular founding fathers of the modern Jewish state, the Bible was an inspiration for proud Jewish behavior and a guide to reawakened national consciousness. Similar views are shared by religious Zionists deeply steeped in the traditional interpretation of scripture. Succinctly put, the Hebrew Bible and its commentaries have had too long a shelf life to be easily cast aside just because modern academics dissect its structure and doubt the historicity of its more imaginative accounts.

Enlightened Jews, resonant to the familiar biblical text, have not found the methods of modern Bible scholars a necessary threat to their Jewish identity. Nor has greater biblical criticism dampened modern Jewry’s enthusiasm for the very core of the Jewish literary tradition. Recovering the literal strata of Hebrew scripture is not seen as compromising the broader narrative of biblical history. If anything, it has opened the most revered of Jewish texts to new modes of interpretation and, with that, new intellectual delights. At first, most Jews were wary of modern scholarship, as it was rooted in Protestant faculties of theology. But over time, they came to embrace every aspect of biblical studies: philological and linguistic analyses; comparative religion; and archaeology, the practice of recovering and interpreting material remains from the ancient Near East. Overcoming prejudices that in the past barred them from posts at leading universities, Jews became professors of Bible and ancient Near Eastern studies. Many have achieved great prominence. From their hard-won academic pulpits, Jewish scholars have staked out new ground with which to confront the conventional wisdom of earlier times, not only the exegesis and Bible commentary of long-standing religious traditions—as one would have expected—but also the documentary hypothesis outlined by the first wave of higher biblical critics.

A growing consensus has developed among biblicalists, Jews and non-Jews alike. Many are now agreed that the biblical critics of the nineteenth century had taken a good idea too far. The documentary hypothesis that dissected the biblical text into its component parts did not explain all that was intended of it. Confident of their methodological bearings, the higher critics set about producing the rainbow—or polychrome—bible, in which the Hebrew text was color-coded to represent the different strands that together compose the sum of its parts. Fragments of passages and even of words were torn out of context and highlighted in bright pastel shades to indicate discrete literary-historical traditions, each assembled at different moments in time and reflecting the different concerns of that moment. In the end, the never-completed rainbow bible proved to be a triumph more of graphic illustration than scientific achievement, not because the conceptual foundations of the documentary hypothesis were unsound, but because the hypothesis itself failed the ultimate test when applied to particular passages and even larger segments of more inclusive texts. The precise dating and provenance of specific literary sites remains a subject of heated debate.

For Jews clinging to old ways, all this scholarly debate was much ado about nothing. The dissection of the Hebrew Bible, which was said to reflect four (now nine) literary-historical traditions, was treated with disdain by those who continued to read scripture as a perfectly revealed text. Their faith in God’s revelation remained unshaken, as always. Nor were more worldly Jews disturbed by academic theories that the Torah was composed of disparate literary sources. What mattered most, particularly to Zionists, was not the higher critics assault on the unity of the biblical text, but any claims that might undermine the far-reaching power of the biblical narrative. Discerning readers of the Hebrew Bible, having been introduced to the study of folklore, were well aware that the mythic character of the patriarchal narratives, the story of the Exodus, and the account of the Israelites in the wilderness might well have masked any kernels of historic truth contained therein. They might even have suspected that the charismatic leaders portrayed in the book of Judges were stock figures drawn larger than any real past. What they were less prepared to compromise were the declared links between their forefathers and the promised land. Even secular Zionists who rejected all theology and most formal religious observance found in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the description of the monarchy under David and Solomon, a template for reconstituting an ancient nation in its ancient homeland. Secular Zionists linked the Hebrew
Bible to their claims, not because of any essential truths it contained but because the text spoke to them of an ongoing history created by an eternal bond between a people and its land. Any theories that might undermine or deny altogether the reported links between that land, the ancient Israelites, and later Jewish communities might be seen as challenging the right of Jews to their own identity and place in history. It is then clear that for reflective Jews, both in Israel and the Diaspora, the modern debate over the Israelite past has become a matter of considerable importance. It has also taken on meaning for Palestinians as they seek to define their own national identity and assert their links to a contested land held sacred by Jews and Christians since ancient times.

THE PROMISED LAND AND THE CLAIMS OF MODERN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The challenge of modern scholarship to received versions of Israel’s origins represents an ironic turn unforeseen by the early higher critics. If anything, these critics imagined that reading the Bible in a wider context would confirm the basic truths of the text they revered. Nineteenth-century biblical scholars who followed the discovery and decipherment of previously unknown Near Eastern languages anticipated, quite rightly, that recovering the literary output of Israel’s ancient neighbors would help situate the biblical narrative in a broader setting. As a result, biblical scholars thought they would be able to reconstruct a richer and more detailed history of the Hebrew text and of Israelite society and culture. The evolution of biblical archeology created comparable expectations for recovering the material world of the ancient Israelites and the peoples in whose midst they dwelt. Altogether, it was expected that the newly uncovered materials would flesh out and confirm many elements of the familiar biblical tradition. Deciphering and commenting on ancient Near Eastern texts and excavating ancient Near Eastern sites would thus provide tangible evidence of Israel’s origins and the formation of the Israelite polity in the promised land.

Scouring these literary sources, early scholars of the ancient Near East looked for and found analogies to the Hebrew narrative, whether or not newly uncovered ancient texts made for tight linkages with the world portrayed in the Bible. Over time, their successors lost interest in unsupported claims of cultural transference and in spurious arguments defending would-be historical connections. Having begun with an outlook that was rooted in illuminating scripture, learned philologists eventually decoupled the study of ancient Israel from that of surrounding Near Eastern cultures. With that, they laid the foundations for the current study of the ancient Near East, a complex and demanding discipline with many subfields, the study of the Hebrew Bible and biblical history being just one among them.

Scholars examining newly published ancient sources and poring over material provided by burgeoning archeological activity found reason to be suspicious of major segments of the biblical account, including seemingly straightforward historical narratives. The result was a powerful impulse to revise history as we know it. Virtually every generation of modern scholars has transformed our understanding of the biblical text and the history and material culture of the biblical world. As in the past, most of today’s revisionists remain part of mainstream biblical scholarship. The issues that divide them from their colleagues are matters of honest debate in which text scholars and archeologists agree to disagree in interpreting different types of evidence, much of it ambiguous. One of the central issues in the current debate is the strength of the early Israelite monarchy. Were the kingdoms of David, and more particularly Solomon, powerful and highly centralized states as we have been led to believe by the Bible and an earlier reading of the archeological record? Or are current revisionists correct in calling for a lower political profile for the early monarchy, based largely on their interpretation of the most recent archeological data? As in the past, today’s revisionists remain part of traditional Bible scholarship. Despite occasionally frayed tempers, the discourse of mainstream biblical scholarship remains reasoned; the purpose of scholars is to recover elements of the shadowy Israelite past.

The same cannot be said for the so-called biblical minimalist, a handful of scholars who have broken from the mainstream and deny altogether the historical framework of the biblical chronicles. Rather than accept the possibility of any discernible truth in the biblical account, they declare the well-known stories of Israel’s origins and the kingdoms that followed literary artifacts woven almost completely out of new cloth. As they interpret the biblical canvas, the depiction of Israel’s origins, the conquest of Canaan, and the establishment of the monarchy and its early history are, in virtually all instances, total fabrications composed hundreds and hundreds of years after the alleged historic moment. If there is any residual truth to be found in scripture, the minimalists believe we are in no position to recognize it alone; they alone recover that truth. Fuller details of the minimalist brief are discussed later in this chapter. Suffice it to say, learned biblicalists fully capable of interrogating the textual and archeological evidence are less dismissive of the biblical narrative. While they also doubt the historicity of particular biblical
accounts and call for a revised history of early Israel, they are not prepared to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Taken as a whole, the current state of biblical studies is extremely lively—some might say too lively, particularly when one factors in the shrill voices of the minimalist school. At times, we have the impression of it being an intellectual free-for-all with few if any restrictions, more like an old-time dispute between hardened religious authorities than the reasoned discourse of the modern academy. Most of the spirited discussion reflects detailed and highly technical debates between mainstream text scholars, even more so between scholars whose research is largely based on written sources and archeologists drawing on evidence acquired in the field. Everyone wants to recover the broad outlines of the past, but too often they are at odds over how best to achieve that. More than ever, there is tension between those who dig into written sources and those who dig in the ground.

Much like textual scholars, archeologists were first driven to recapture the world of the Bible but through the study of material remains. Their lens on the past was focused on what could actually be seen or imaginatively reconstructed from snippets of evidence. At present, archeologists employ highly sophisticated techniques that allow them to recover and assess ancient technologies, patterns of subsistence, diet, socio-economic structure, and the like. Having absorbed recent social science, archeologists are also familiar with theoretical models of early state formation, our very concern here; all that is very different from the origins of the discipline.

The archeology of the Holy Land started modestly enough, with explorers putting around sacred sites in the 1840s. In time, these investigations of existing buildings and their environs gave way to widespread exploration. Then, in the last decade of the century, archeologists began massive excavations of sites identified with locations in the Hebrew Bible. Having assumed that these mounds were in fact ancient biblical sites because of similar-sounding Arabic place names, the excavators went about the task of stripping away the earth. Although aware of the need for chronological pointers with which to date individual layers and the artifacts found therein, the archeologists of that generation did not produce a proper basis for establishing chronology. It was only when Sir Flinders Petrie arrived in Palestine around the turn of the century, and more particularly when W. F. Albright began excavating after World War I, that Palestinian archeology became more scientific and led to a complex and more extended historical analyses.

As director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, Albright and his disciples systematically excavated a broad Palestinan landscape. In that effort, the archeologists sought to link the histories of diverse locations by establishing reliable guides for dating individual sites. This was achieved mostly by advances in recording and classifying ceramic ware that was found at each dig. With the Albrightian enterprise, archeology moved from random exploration, treasure hunting, and excavations of individual mounds to strategic digging that might reveal not only the history of particular sites, but also the social and economic profile of an entire region. Results obtained from many soundings initiated between the wars proved nothing less than a watershed in understanding the complex history of ancient Palestine and its environs.

The quest to recover the historic past by digging up the Holy Land also served the interests of believers for whom the Bible represented essential truths. The circle that gathered around Albright in mandatory Palestine and at the Johns Hopkins University, where he directed the prestigious Oriental Seminary, drew heavily from the ranks of Christian clergy, or in any case graduates of theological schools, like Albright himself. Many if not most of Albright’s students taught at Christian seminaries or church-affiliated colleges and universities. That is not to say they could be rightly accused of being fundamentalists in their approach to textual problems or driven by naïve belief in their understanding of complex historical processes—far from that. But given their religious sensibilities, the Hebrew Bible was always with them, in a manner of speaking. That held true whether they sat at their desks or excavated in the field.

There was also the Palestine Oriental Society, which drew scholars from a wide variety of countries and cultural and religious backgrounds, as well as the British School of Archeology that at one time shared quarters with its American counterpart. Over time, a number of groups representing different European countries and church denominations established institutes of their own. The presence of these biblical scholars in the Holy Land was ubiquitous. Christians of all denominations, some church-linked and some not, peppered the landscape of mandatory Palestine.

To be sure, not all the archeologists active during the period of the British Mandate were churchmen, or former churchmen, or Christians cut more or less from that same mold. The Department of Antiquities, created by the British mandatory administration, employed both Jewish and Arab archeologists, however few in number. For Jews interested in the historic landscape of the Holy Land, there were institutions of their own making. The Palestine Exploration Society was founded in 1914, even before the onset of the British mandate. Later, in 1925, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem established as part of its original faculties an institute that trained...
an interwar generation of Jewish archeologists and sponsored fieldwork covering the length and breadth of the country. As regards field methods, the archeologists of Palestine’s Jewish community (Yishuv) were influenced for a long time by the towering presence of Albright. A man of commanding physical stature and astounding intellectual breadth, Albright seemed to loom larger than life. There was also a personal rapport between the great man and his Jewish colleagues. Unlike most foreign archeologists working in Palestine, Albright learned modern Hebrew, which he spoke with some fluency. He also showed enormous respect for the economic and cultural vitality of the Jewish pioneers who had come to build up the country in anticipation of establishing a new and thoroughly modern Jewish homeland. The doyen of Palestinian archeology came to see the Zionists much as they saw themselves, that is, as a force for revitalizing a land that had grown stagnant with centuries of presumed neglect. In sum, his vision corroborated the Zionist interpretation of the past and, no less importantly, validated their expectations of the future. Above all, he had high praise for the professional skill of his Jewish colleagues; they, in turn, revered and honored him.

As did so many Christians exploring and excavating in Palestine, Jewish archeologists began their endeavors with the all-too-familiar Hebrew Bible in hand. But their task was neither to affirm nor reverberate to eternal religious truths, nor was it to revel in a distant past out of mere antiquarian interest. For the archeologists of the Yishuv, the recovery of ancient Israel, highly valued in its own right, was also a useful tool with which to carve out a Zionist future. And so, they turned to the ancient homeland for examples of a vibrant and flourishing past, the kind of past that might serve as inspiration for a new age and new Jewish commonwealth. Archeology represented a true marriage of modern science to nation building, all made possible because of the continued and powerful resonance of the Jewish foundational narrative. The emergence of the Jewish state in 1948 and, more particularly, the Israeli conquest of the West Bank in 1967, brought much of the ancient Land of Israel under Jewish control. The restoration of Jewish sovereignty to almost all the land of their forefathers stimulated further archeological exploration and strengthened the already existing links between Israel’s archeological enterprise and the growth of the modern state.

As new data mounted, beginning in the interwar years, there was a perceived need to reassess the master narrative of the Jewish people, particularly the accounts of Israel’s origins and, following that, the history of the early Israelite kingdoms. The evidence, textual and archeological, tended to reveal that the biblical account of the Exodus and the Israelite conquest of Canaan could not be fully if at all reconciled with the unfolding historical and archeological record. Then, beginning in the 1980s, the recorded history of the early Israelite monarchy came under intense scrutiny. David and Solomon, portrayed by biblical chroniclers as mighty kings ruling over highly centralized states that projected power within all Canaan and beyond, were downgraded along with their kingdoms by revisionist scholars—in the case of David, to a local chieftain of a tribal or tribe-like configuration. Jerusalem, reportedly their capital, was not yet a major city but at best a dull and inconsequential backwater settlement. Unlike their predecessors and most of their current colleagues, some archeologists, labeled revisionists, could find no discernable trace of monumental architecture for the period of the united monarchy. The absence of impressive monuments suggested to them a biblical record reshaped in later times and circumstances to magnify the importance of their ancestors, legitimizing thereby their own reigns and policies. At the same time, a small coterie of biblical minimalists working outside the mainstream of biblical scholarship pounced on the new theories and denied altogether the historicity of the Hebrew Bible and the most ancient provenance of that highly revered text.

All this archeological activity, going back some eighty-five years, has given rise to unanticipated debates linked to the politics of Jewish and Palestinian Arab nationalism. For Israelis, the archeological record was seen as confirming the broad outlines of their ancestors’ experiences in the Land of Israel. For Palestinians, who identified with the indigenous inhabitants, the ancient peoples of Canaan, the same archeological record denied the authenticity of the biblical narrative, thus undercutting Zionist claims to the Holy Land.

**BIBLICAL REVISIONISM AND THE PERIOD OF THE UNITED MONARCHY**

The reigns of David and Solomon, the quintessential icons of a powerful Jewish state controlling its own destiny, are currently debated among both serious scholars and those who would manipulate scholarship for narrowly defined political purposes. Claims downplaying the united monarchy have thus caused a stir among those who follow trends in biblical studies—nowhere more so than in the State of Israel. The revisionist impulse was particularly disturbing to Zionists who saw the kingdoms of David and Solomon as proper models for a Jewish people reclaiming their ancestral homeland and charting a course to independent nationhood in modern times.
In and of itself, the debate stirred up by these archaeologists has no political valence. Some of the leading critics of the biblical account are in fact Israeli scholars deeply committed to their country. However much the lay public of Israel is agitated by the attempt to debunk long-revered tales, the issue dividing biblical scholars is not really one of national politics but the elusive search for a more accurate description of the ancient past. It also highlights the different approaches of those biblical scholars who value written texts as historical data, however tendentiously driven, and archeologists who favor the evidence of material culture. In both cases, the evidence tends to be ambiguous and in need of constant review.

Serious text scholars readily admit how difficult it is to tease history from the biblical account. Literary-historical studies have given rise to sharp exchanges between individuals and schools of thought. When pressed, archeologists will also acknowledge both the complexity and uncertainty of their craft. At times, one may wish to question whether a hillock bearing an Arabic toponym is in fact the precise site of a similar-sounding place familiar to us from scripture. Moreover, archeologists are limited to what they actually find and can date with confidence. Their entire enterprise is based on establishing chronological pointers, usually through an analysis of ceramic ware, which is then compared with shards from corresponding sites said to be of the same period. It all begins with the ability to date an individual site or, to be more precise, on archeologists arriving at a consensus regarding chronology.

As with textual scholarship, the archeological wisdom of the moment can give way to new interpretations. From time to time, established chronologies are reviewed and rejected in light of later fieldwork. Archeologists currently donning the mantle of revisionism would be well served if they exercised a measure of poise rather than in trumpeting their latest views, all the more so in demeaning the views of their predecessors. Indeed, if the revisionists had packaged their findings in more circumspect language, they would no doubt have ruffled fewer feathers among their professional peers and the myriad amateurs who follow trends in biblical studies. Still, the revisionists remain very much a part of mainstream biblical scholarship. Their colleagues may often sharply disagree with them, but however contentious the debate, all sides recognize, albeit sometimes grudgingly, the seriousness of purpose and technical skill of their opponents.

The present controversy on the rise of the Israelite monarchy takes us back in time. It was only some forty years ago that an earlier generation of archeologists in Israel discussed the monumental architecture of the Solomonic era at Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo, all sites of major cities, reportedly built or fortified by the Israelite monarch. Referring to Solomon’s forced labor projects, the biblical chronicler notes: “[They were initiated] to build the House of the Lord, [Solomon’s] own palace, the citadels [millo] and wall of Jerusalem, and Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer” (I Kings 9:15). During the 1950s and 1960s, archeologists managed to uncover the monumental gates of the latter three cities and found them to be of the same design, suggesting thereby that the fortification walls are of a piece, in accordance with the thrust of the biblical text. They were thus seen as part of a concurrent undertaking that included the massive development of Solomon’s Jerusalem, for which there was no archeological evidence. Nor, alas, has any come to light since, despite intensive digs in and around the Holy City.

Readers relying on the biblical text were given to understand that the detailed account of Solomon’s building activities accentuated the greatness of his realm and the power he was able to wield from his capital in the hills of Judea. It all seemed perfectly clear. That is hardly the case today. Archeologists led by Israel Finkelstein and David Ussishkin have challenged the accepted view of Solomon’s power. The biblical text notwithstanding, they have reviewed the archeological data and concluded that the monumental architecture of Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer, indicators of a highly centralized and powerful regime, must be from the following century, that is, not from the tenth century B.C.E., but the ninth. Rewriting a long-received history, they argue that the first great Israelite kingdom was that of David and Solomon in the south—that is, in Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean hillside—but the House of Omri, the kingdom situated to the north in Samaria, the present Arab city of Nablus and its environs.

This argument is by no means limited to giving alternative dates for the monumental architecture of three fortified cities. Reviewing a wide range of archeological sites discovered in recent years, the new breed of archeologists concluded that the settlements of the Judean hills were relatively poor during the tenth century, too impoverished in fact to reflect the imperial state described in the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps that is why, for all its rich detail, the biblical text describing Solomon’s reign has no parallel in extrabiblical sources. In contrast, the northern kingdom of the following century is represented as a powerful actor in contemporaneous Near Eastern accounts. If the Assyrian annals are to be believed, the House of Omri, more particularly his son King Ahab, was a formidable threat to the most powerful empire of the time. Oddly enough, the biblical account of Ahab’s reign omits any mention of his confrontation with the Assyrians. Had it been reported by the biblical chronicler, the wayward king’s foreign success might have been interpreted as a sign of his greatness. Instead, the author
of Kings turns to domestic concerns and condemns Ahab for breaking with the ways of his people and his Lord. So perfidious was the king’s behavior that in postbiblical tradition, the sullied Ahab will be one of a select group of humans denied a place in the world to come. By condemning Ahab for religious backsliding instead of praising him for standing up to the mighty Assyrians, the biblical narrative would appear to have turned history upside down, or, if you prefer, turned it north to south.

How then should we regard the biblical stories of David and Solomon? What could have given rise to so detailed, so vivid, and according to the revisionists, so exaggerated a portrait of these two monarchs and the southern realm, including the description of a major building campaign in which Solomon fortified three cities that, the revisionists concede, all have similar protective gates? Surely, these matching gates are a very odd coincidence given that the account of Solomon’s extensive building activities is otherwise considered an imaginative construction of a nonexistent past. If they are to convince text scholars, the revisionists cannot simply discount the biblical narrative based on their reading of archeological data. They are obliged to explain why the biblical chroniclers reported “events” as they did; but in doing that, they too enter the gossamer realm of imagined history.

Their argument can be succinctly stated. As archeologists have found no physical evidence of monumental architecture or the accumulation of great wealth in the south, they have concluded that the kingdom centered in the Judean hill country was relatively poor and of no great consequence. It was only two centuries later, when the Assyrians broke the back of the northern kingdom, that the Judean monarchs were able to establish a powerful polity, and with that, Jerusalem took on the features of a major city. A purer form of monothecism was now practiced by the ancient Israelites as the southern kingdom underwent a period of religious renewal under King Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.). In keeping with these changes, the Israelite theologians rewrote the past in order to give the south a more prominent place in the extended narrative of the people. David and Solomon, local chieftains, were thus transformed into mighty monarchs. The limited territory they actually ruled was retroactively described as a vast state that extended well beyond the borders of Canaan. Seen from this perspective, the preserved biblical narrative is the literary effort of southerners advancing their political and moral claims by inventing a past that was not actually theirs.

There is much in this reconstruction of events that is accepted by the majority of biblical scholars. Josiah undertook reforms; the Judean state prospered in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., and it is believed that much of the biblical text we read today was first formulated during those centuries. Scholars also agree that the biblical theologians described the early monarchy to promote the interests of the Davidic line. All that being the case, why has a largely technical debate among academicians given way to so much public controversy, both in Israel and the world at large? Why should reflective Israelites be overly perturbed if, in fact, the revisionists are basically right?

There is nothing in the revisionist argument that compromises the links between Jews and the land they long considered part of their ancient heritage. Perhaps Jerusalem was a relatively unimportant site during the early monarchy, but it surely grew in status thereafter. Perhaps Solomon did not build a magnificent temple as reported in the book of Kings, but a temple was subsequently built. When all is considered, the gist of the revisionist argument, which is based almost entirely on archeological evidence, is that the emergence of a powerful Israelite polity took place a century or so after we are led to believe that it did, and contrary to the biblical account, it did so first in Samaria to the north rather than Jerusalem to the south. Nevertheless, the southern kingdom managed to find its place in the sun two centuries later.

What truly disturbs the sensibilities of Jews is not so much a tenth century devoid of a powerful and highly centralized Israelite kingdom but the scholarly and political excesses of the so-called Danish School. The reference is to a small group of biblical minimalists who have broken with the mainstream by denying the historicity of all Hebrew scripture and challenging the accepted dates for the various strands that compose the text. With that, the “Danes” have challenged the entire mainstream of biblical scholarship. There are significant political overtones to the minimalist position. Academic controversy, too often marked by sharply expressed views and less-than-gentlemanly behavior, has been channeled by the Danes into denying the entire foundation of modern Israel’s national narrative. At the same time, some minimalists and their followers avidly promote the concept of a legitimate Palestinian identity rooted in the ancient Near East. An arcane debate about the history of ancient Israel and the formation of the biblical text has thus become part of a larger political controversy between the modern state of Israel and Palestinian Arabs struggling to forge a nation-state of their own. Who then are the Danes and what is their impact on the controversial politics of the Arab-Israel dispute?
BIBLICAL MINIMALISTS AND ARAB-ISRAEL POLITICS

The Danish School represents a relatively small group of scholars, originally centered in Copenhagen but now situated at various academic venues, particularly in Great Britain. Although referred to as a "school," these scholars form a society of diverse interests and talents. What draws them together is a minimalist approach to the Hebrew Bible. They go several steps beyond their revisionist colleagues and contend that the Israelites of Hebrew scripture, their monotheism, their material and literary culture, their reported ties to the land of Canaan, even the Hebrew language, all came into being long after their purported origins. In sum, the biblical record as we now have it is an invented myth written in a language first devised by scribes in the Persian period (fifth century B.C.E.). Minimalists admit there may be rare echoes of a real history in the current biblical text, but they also maintain that few if any traces of this past can be extracted from the mythological overlay that has shaped the Bible's meaning for many generations of readers.

Skeptical from the outset, the minimalists began their assault on scripture by attacking the patriarchal narratives. Here, they were more or less on safe ground. Other scholars had also grown wary of reported links between the stories of Israel's forefathers and the world of second-millennium Mesopotamia. Upon closer examination, the biblical account was found to contain many anachronisms that could only have dated from centuries later. The minimalists then questioned the narratives of Joshua's conquest, Israel's origins in the land of Canaan, and the scholarship of past generations on that subject. Here too they were on relatively safe ground and not all that far removed from the conventional wisdom of an evolving biblical scholarship. But then they went several steps further and boldly denied the subsequent accounts of the biblical narrative in a manner that was bound to upset scholars, regardless of whether these biblical scholars favored squeezing history from texts or, like archeologists, they were more apt to trust the evidence of material culture.

For the minimalists, it is not enough to contend that the united monarchy was not the highly centralized and powerful state described in the Hebrew Bible. In effect, their claim is that there was no united monarchy at all, no David, and no Solomon. Not even the subsequent Israelite kings of the south, rulers described in detail in the Bible, are considered truly historic figures. There were no Israelites, or to be more precise, there were no Israelites as represented in scripture. For the minimalists, the current Hebrew Bible is not merely a text that reshapes the past to conform to the ideological concerns of the present, a proposition with which all responsible Bible scholars have long agreed. The familiar biblical text was produced almost entirely from new cloth as late as the Hellenistic period. One of the leading Danes has even attempted to prove—or at least strongly suggest—that the Hebrew Bible, which has been invoked to recover the history of the ancient Near East and has served as a basis for Jewish behavior and group identity for more than two millennia, reflects the world of the Greeks as much as the Fertile Crescent. For example, the original King Ahab, a figure whose historicity is conceded—he is, after all, mentioned in the Assyrian annals—is not at all the Ahab of the Hebrew Bible. The scriptural manifestation of this ancient ruler is modeled instead after Antiochus IV, the Seleucid monarch of the Book of Maccabees (175–164 B.C.E.).

We are obliged to consider the more general proposition put forth by the minimalists, namely, that the Hebrew Bible was an elaborate literary artifact portraying a history spun almost entirely from the imagination of inventive Hebrew scribes. This view raises an obvious question. Who would have created a mythic biblical history and civilization where none existed and to what purpose? In his book In Search of Ancient Israel (1992), Philip Davies, one of the leading proponents of mythic Israel, lays out the minimalist position in a manner fully accessible to an audience of nonspecialists. Davies, reflecting the views of his minimalist colleagues, argues that the Bible was authored by a settler population, an alien society that had been transplanted in Jerusalem and the surrounding hill country during the Persian ascendancy of the fifth century B.C.E. In effect, the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which purportedly describe the return of exiles from Babylon, mask a rather different story. The real tale is not one of returning Israelites who had been forced from their homeland after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., but rather that of a nonindigenous people transplanted in Jerusalem after the Persian conquest of Palestine. Lacking a history in their new environs, and hence without any sense of legitimate ownership to the land they came to occupy, this group of recent settlers found themselves in need of a new identity that could link them to Canaan's past. Residual folklore of the region, which might have referred—if ever so vaguely—to a historic figure or event, was thus woven by scribes into the fabric of a newly created national myth. Searching for ways to authenticate their claims, the settlers forged a history going back to a remote age, an era in which a fictitious Abraham entered into a covenant with his god Yahweh. In that pact, God reportedly promised Abraham's progeny the land of Canaan. The myths of Israel's origins in the land and of Israel's subsequent history until the Babylonian exile allowed the settlers, who would evolve...
into the Jewish people, to preempt the claims of the original inhabitants. And so, for more than two millennia, the Hebrew Bible, revered by Jews and Christians alike, became the central text for understanding the history of a distant past inappropriately named “the biblical period.” An indigenous population that had remained more or less the same since remote times was thus denied a history and identity of its own. The date of the recorded biblical text varies among the minimalists, but all are agreed that in its current form, it stems from a time no earlier than the Hellenistic period, which began in the fourth century B.C.E.

To their credit, the scholars of the Danish school tend to read widely. In building their arguments, some move back and forth across disciplines, referring to works ranging from general linguistics to social anthropology and cultural studies. Thomas L. Thompson’s massive and densely written *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archeological Sources* (1999) contains a bibliography of more than thirty pages, a sign of considerable learning. It is, however, one thing to read widely; it is another to have the tools with which to interrogate the written word. On the whole, neither philology nor archeology, the twin pillars of ancient Near Eastern scholarship, are the strong suits of the Danish school, even less so of their camp followers. The result is twofold: There is a tendency to misread both literary sources and the evidence of material culture. At times, the line of argumentation is exceedingly tortured, the equivalent of forcing square pegs into round holes, all made necessary because the concept of a mythic Israel dictates the evidence rather than the other way round.

Seeking support with which to buttress their conceptual framework, scholars of the Danish school read widely and employ anything that might conceivably bolster their argument. All such data is then privileged, regardless of its source or merit. It is ironic that when it serves their purpose the most skeletal of the Bible critics are willing to embrace without question scholarship that is highly speculative and/or simply in error. Nor are they inclined to correct their views, let alone abandon them, when faced with overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Having embraced the concept of a mythic Israel invented in the Persian period and given final expression only during Hellenistic times, the minimalists are left with much to explain. How can we, or, to be more precise, how can they square their Israel of the Persian period with the Israel of the Egyptian Merneptah stele, a text dating from the thirteenth century B.C.E.? What might be a problem for many reflective biblicists does not trouble the scholars of the Danish school. They maintain that the stele, inscribed eight hundred years prior to the alleged invention of mythic Israel, may refer to a geographical place called Israel and not a people. Those properly trained in Egyptian understood very well that grammatically, the text of the stele admits to no meaning other than the people of Israel. Still, without other contemporaneous sources mentioning Israel by name, it is difficult to draw any hard conclusions about the people of Israel listed on the stele and how they might be related to the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible, if at all.

The epigraphic evidence of the ninth century B.C.E. is decidedly less ambiguous. An Aramaic inscription from Tel Dan and a new reading of the famed Mesha Stone written in Moabite, a language closely linked to biblical Hebrew, both refer to the “House of (byl) David (dwd),” a seeming indication that the Davidic dynasty was well known roughly half a millennium before the minimalists contend it was invented. And yet, there is no reason for the minimalists to be perturbed, let alone panic. They simply read the letters *dwd* to mean something other than “David [King of Israel].” Orthographically, that is possible, but no responsible scholar would give credence to such an unlikely reading of the inscription. Still, there is a fallback argument. The Israel Museum staff is accused of forging the inscription from Tel Dan. Another contemporaneous reference to Israelites in the Mesha Stone is explained away by a similar sleight of hand. All that dovetails nicely with the broad political claims of certain minimalists, for we are then led to believe that just as the ancient Hebrew scribes invented an Israelite past in order to usurp the lands of the historic inhabitants of ancient Palestine, modern Israelis forge evidence to deny the rights of today’s Palestinian Arabs. The latter are held to be the alleged descendants of the ancient peoples of Canaan and, by implication, the legitimate owners of the land. Of such claims, more is said shortly.

There is still more to trouble the Danish school. Contrary to their deeply held beliefs, the traditional biblical narrative seemingly contains echoes of a real past. Granted, for so much of the biblical account there is little if any corroborating evidence from extrabiblical materials, but how can we be convinced that ancient Israel is almost entirely the invention of the postmonarchic Persian period when many of Israel’s monarchs listed in the book of Kings also appear in Assyrian and Babylonian sources? To be sure, one could argue that Hebrew scribes of the Persian period had some folkloric material to inform their literary imagination, but there are enough instances where the account of the biblical chronicler seems to fit a history known from an earlier world of Mesopotamia and Egypt. That being the case, why not promote the likely historicity of certain events reported in the Hebrew Bible? Perhaps the most notable example of such an historic
echo is the story of the Assyrian king Sennacherib's eighth-century campaign against King Hezekiah and the fortified towns of the southern Israelite monarchy, an account that has parallels in the Assyrian annals. To be sure, history is disguised in both sources. But both agree that Sennacherib sent detachments to attack Jerusalem, that the Assyrian army surrounded the city, and that they withdrew rather than launch a decisive assault to secure the Israelite capital. Some scholars have even suggested that the biblical account of Sennacherib's campaign may contain snippets of genuine archival material—all that is very different from a literary artifice woven from new cloth centuries later.

As for the claim that the redacted Hebrew Bible is the creation of the Hellenistic period, the minimalists must contend with the very language of scripture. Meticulous investigations of biblical Hebrew texts and inscriptions have revealed a real distinction between so-called preexilic and postexilic writings, that is, between sources before the reported Babylonian captivity of the sixth century B.C.E. and the onset of the Persian period thereafter. Faced with this evidence, the minimalists found themselves in a quandary. Were the language of scriptural works thought by mainstream scholars to be preexilic and postexilic indeed different, one would ordinarily conclude that various books of the Bible were created at very different moments in time. And as the earlier works would have been written before the collapse of the Babylonian Empire, before any nonindigenous group of settlers could have been transplanted by the victorious Persians in Jerusalem, there clearly must have been both an Israelite people and written versions of biblical works long before the Persian let alone Hellenistic period. With that, the entire edifice of the Danish school collapses, along with the moral and political lessons that some of its supporters wish to impart. For there is then no basis for maintaining that foreign settlers of the fifth century, the alien progenitors of the Jews, usurped the history and rights of a population rooted in its land since time immemorial, the progenitors of today's Palestinian Arabs.

The minimalists have found themselves hard-pressed for an answer to the impressive linguistic evidence arrayed against them. The linguistic basis of their argument, such as it is, is a highly speculative article, twelve pages in all, by E. A. Knauf. Knauf suggests that, unlike other Near Eastern languages that evolved over time, biblical Hebrew is artificial, the creation of an identifiable moment in human history. To be more specific, it was created by scribes of the Persian period. Truth be told, Knauf's views have not won him many supporters outside the minimalist camp. Nevertheless, if biblical Hebrew were indeed the artificial language claimed by representa-

tives of the Danish school, why should various books of the biblical canon exhibit such marked differences in vocabulary, orthography, phrasing, and the like? More important, why should inscriptions of earlier and later times exhibit similar differences? Ever imaginative, but clearly groping for an answer, some minimalists conclude that the differences were consciously woven into the text in order to create a second Hebrew, a seemingly archaic language that would lend legitimacy to the recently invented myths of the settlers as they struggled to wrest the land away from its native inhabitants.

Of all the arguments in defense of mythic Israel, the response of the minimalists to the linguistic evidence is by far the least persuasive. To claim that foreign scribes could have created a literature in two languages simultaneously—one a current language to describe the recent condition of their people, and one an artificial archaic language to describe an invented past in a manner that would silence their doubters—seems far-fetched at best. To think that possible, we would have to believe that a modern dramatist such as Tom Stoppard, the ingenuous playwright who has used Shakespeare's plots, characters, and themes to suit his own creative dramaturgy, could actually write a play comparable to Hamlet and then successfully peddle the work as being that of the bard himself.

It comes as no great surprise that the minimalists have come under withering criticism from text scholars and archeologists alike. On more than one occasion, that criticism has been expressed in harsh, almost vituperative language. Perhaps it is the overly pugnacious style of certain minimalists that riles nerves raw. Perhaps it is the irritating disparity between audacious claims on the one hand and lack of technical skills on the other. The self-proclaimed guardians of academic standards can become unusually sensitive at times. We might also consider the tendency of some minimalists to embrace intellectual trends that their opponents regard as faddish and devoid of merit. Whatever the case, even the gentlest opponent of the Danish school comes down heavily against them. In "The Copenhagen School: The Historiographical Issues" (2003)—a short but very thoughtful survey of the minimalist position—Marc Brettler, a scholar long interested and well published in biblical historiography, bends over backwards to do justice to various claims of the Danish school and then calmly and thoroughly demolishes each and every one of them. His is a rhetorical style other academics would do well to emulate.

On the whole, the minimalists have made little if any headway in changing the views of professional biblicists. They remain few in number and confined largely to circles in Copenhagen and the United Kingdom, particularly at the University of Sheffield. By no means should we consider
the minimalists a persecuted academic minority. Admittedly, the tone of some critics has been nasty, perhaps excessively so, but one can hardly say the Danes have been muted by a conspiracy of their peers. The minimalists have never had a problem in disseminating their views, neither in academic nor more public forums. The print media have paid considerable attention to recent developments in biblical studies. Such accounts are often marked by a racy style, interesting graphics, and suggestive story leads, all designed to draw the attention of the average reader. Reporters, themselves without expertise to render qualitative judgments, have given equal weight to all positions regardless of merit, thus allowing readers to choose indiscriminately from among proclaimed truths. From time to time, the various issues dividing biblicalists are also taken up in the Biblical Archeological Review (BAR), a glossy popular journal widely read by both professional scholars and amateur enthusiasts. The major combatants in the Bible wars have all had their say in the BAR. As a result, the debate over biblical revisionism has become broadly accessible for readers lacking the technical skills to follow dense scholarly arguments. Although they may have, at best, a partial grasp of the issues, some of these readers have actually become involved in the larger discussion. A number of literary critics and anthropologists have sought to influence the burgeoning debate over biblical origins and allegedly silenced histories. That is particularly true for those who use the noisy but relatively benign politics of the academy to stoke the fires of the attention-grabbing Arab–Israel dispute. With that, various assumptions of the Danish school have been recycled to serve the claims of Palestinian nationalism. As a result, an arcane debate grounded in archeology and textual readings has been transmuted into one of modern nationhood.

Having been rejected by mainstream scholars of the ancient Near East, minimalists embracing the Palestinian cause declare their critics agents of a universal academic conspiracy in which professors of western universities deny those who would speak on behalf of the colonized “other.” Such a view is openly proclaimed by Keith W. Whitelam in his widely quoted book, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (1996), a work whose pungent subtitle completely captures the drift of the author’s thesis and its debt to the literary critic Edward Said. Said, the son of a naturalized American citizen of Palestinian birth, spent his formative years in Egypt (1935–1948), his father having migrated there to open a branch of the family stationery business after a decade’s sojourn in the United States. During the turmoil that followed the emergence of the State of Israel, the family returned to America where young Edward, then in his early teens, attended a prestigious boarding school and later pursued his university studies. At the time of his death in 2003, he was the Parr Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia and indefatigable and eloquent spokesman for the Palestinian cause. A cosmopolitan exposed to the worlds of both East and West, Said argued that a politically and intellectually arrogant West has denied the colonized “other” the means and opportunity to define its own history and interpret its own native culture. Or, as Whitelam puts it with regard to biblical studies and the Palestinian people,

There exists, then, what we may term a discourse of biblical studies which is a powerful interlocking network of ideas and assertions believed by its practitioners to be the reasonable results of objective scholarship while masking the realities of an exercise of power. We are faced with the paradox of the invention of “ancient Israel” ... an entity that has been given substance and power as a scholarly construct, while Palestinian history lacks substance or even existence in ... our academic institutions. Attempts to challenge this powerful narrative [of ancient Israel] are likely to be dismissed as politically or ideologically motivated and therefore unreasonable. (1996)

Like many writers, Whitelam positions himself for his audience by offering tidbits of autobiographical information, a sort of apology for not having written the kind of book that readers might have expected of him and that he himself had originally contemplated. He indicates that he began his work as part of a “grandiose scheme ... conceived [as] an antidote to the standard histories of ancient Israel which have dominated biblical studies since the nineteenth century” (1996). But over time, he realized that he lacked the learning required for so prodigious an undertaking. That alone might have dissuaded him from his original goal. But Whitelam also came to realize that to complete such a project, he would have had to confront and overcome the innate prejudice that informed the way biblical scholars formulated and organized their research and then went about practicing their craft. He is convinced that the history of ancient Palestine (and its indigenous inhabitants) was hijacked by authorities interested only in “an ancient Israel conceived and presented as the [Judeo-Christian] taproot of Western civilization.” To counter that approach, Whitelam ultimately decided on a project that would undermine the orthodox wisdom dominating biblical studies today. The larger work that would have required immense learning was thus put aside in favor of a polemic against or, as Whitelam would no doubt claim, a corrective to the current state of scholarship on the Hebrew Bible.
At first glance, there is nothing innovative about Whitelam's attempt to correct scholarship that links biblical studies directly and almost exclusively to a Judeo-Christian heritage. Assyriologists have long decoupled the study of the Hebrew Bible from the other civilizations of the ancient Near East. Archeologists tend not to refer to biblical archeology these days, but speak instead of Syro-Palestinian archeology, a descriptive label that expands their discipline beyond the borders of Canaan and the purported period of the Israelite polity—however that polity might be defined. We might add by way of explanation that that shift in the way scholars now think about archeology was occasioned by William Dever, perhaps the most vociferous critic of the minimalist school. Finally, biblicists sat at the leading departments of Near Eastern studies, scholars who in earlier generations would have been able to get by with a basic knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, find themselves obliged to command a host of ancient languages in order to engage in comparative studies, be they historical, linguistic, or literary. One can hardly claim that biblical studies, as it is now practiced in the leading academic centers of the discipline, are so parochial as to exclude the longer history of Canaan and its peoples other than the Israelites.

The early interest in the ancient Near East was guided by the centrality of the Bible in Judeo-Christian civilization. That interest continues to resonate among a general public for whom the Bible is both a source of comfort and a guide to moral behavior. Everyone admits to that, including the critics of the Danish school. That is hardly the case, however, in secular institutions of higher learning, or even some denominational schools with a scholarly tradition in biblical studies. We might well ask, why then does the story of the ancient Israelites still dominate the histories of Canaan, for it surely does? The answer does not lie in any theological concerns, or in any alleged cultural biases of Western scholarship. It certainly does not stem from any desire to thwart the national aspirations of today's Palestinian Arabs. Truth be told, the Hebrew Bible holds center stage because it contains the only sustained historical narrative we possess from and about ancient Canaan. None of the indigenous peoples mentioned in the Bible—not the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, and Perizzites, or the peoples who lived in Cisjordan, such as the Moabites, Ammonites, and various Edomites—leave any extensive written sources. Similarly, the powerful Philistines, a sea people from the Aegean who invaded the country and settled along its coast, are known to us only from the remains of their material culture and what others say about them.

Aside from the Hebrew Bible, the only extended descriptions of Canaan before the emergence of ancient Israel are found in a cache of Egyptian letters from the fourteenth century B.C.E. The texts, uncovered in Tel el-Amarna, the site of the royal city founded by the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, are mostly written in Akkadian, an east Semitic language that was then the international lingua franca. However much influenced by west Semitic, the linguistic label attached to most languages of Canaan, none of these letters was penned in what may be called a Canaanite dialect, nor do they seem to reflect directly the broad views of the local population. There is, however, much to glean from the Amarna texts. Unlike the biblical account, a well-crafted literary work that exhibits the biases of the Hebrew chroniclers, the Amarna letters are archival documents. As such, they can be more safely used to reconstruct political structures and the unfolding events of the time. Not surprisingly, these documents have been closely studied and with much profit by Assyriologists and well-trained biblical scholars. But all told, these documents cover less than thirty years, hardly the stuff from which to write an extensive history of ancient Canaan—certainly not a history that would satisfy the minimalists and their supporters.

There is, to be sure, an extensive literature written in Ugaritic, a northwest Semitic language bearing some similarities to Hebrew. Ugaritic texts have proved invaluable to our understanding of certain biblical passages and more generally of biblical civilization. But there are no historical texts to speak of from the Kingdom of Ugarit. That aside, the kingdom was situated in northern Syria and not in historic Canaan, whose northern border lay far to the south in today's Lebanese region surrounding Tyre and Sidon. Any claim that Ugarit and its civilization can stand for the peoples of Canaan and their civilization, let alone be considered an antecedent to modern Palestine and Arabic-speaking Palestinians, is a bit much. Such a view, suggested by Basem Ra'ad, an Arab scholar of American literature, is an indication of how far politically committed amateurs are prepared to wade in unfamiliar waters. Having imbued the intoxicating spirits of politically motivated minimalists like Whitelam, even specialists in American studies can register their views on the ancient Near East and its relevance to the current state of affairs. What is most startling about Whitelam's work is not his expressed desire to recover the history of non-Israelite Canaan. That is a project that all scholars of the ancient Near East can and have indeed embraced, including Israelis who have long sought to trace the history of their land and its adjacent regions from the Stone Age through the Islamic period. Among Israelis, there is absolutely no opposition to focusing interest on the history of Canaan or the various peoples submerged under the label Canaanite. It is rather Whitelam's arbitrary labeling of the inhabitants of ancient Canaan Palestinians and his attempt to link these Canaanites cum
Palestinians to today’s Arab inhabitants of the country that elicits negative comment. We have already noted the ambiguities surrounding “geographical” Palestine and the equally ambiguous notion of a Palestinian identity in premodern times (see chapters 2 and 3). If we can speak of Palestine and Palestinians in the most ancient world, it is only in reference to the Philistines (the biblical Philistines), whose territorial domain (Pleshet or Phila-sh-shi) gave rise to Palestine, the long-standing descriptive label that first took root in the Graeco-Roman period. Let us forget, the Philistines themselves were not native to Canaan. Like the Crusaders who penetrated the land some two and half millennia later, the Philistines spoke a language completely unrelated to that of the other peoples. Their material culture and political organization were similarly distinctive and partially explain their initial success against the land’s native inhabitants. Only later did the sea people from the Aegean become more fully integrated into the local culture, a process that still begs for detailed explanation.

The very notion of an indigenous people in the land known as Canaan is itself highly problematic. A geographical expanson serving as a bridge between southwest Asia and Africa, Canaan—or however we might refer to the aforementioned territory—was penetrated by many peoples at diverse moments of history. Some, including tribesman from Arabia in the seventh century C.E., settled permanently in their newly acquired domains. Like all previous invaders, the seventh-century Arabs eventually intermingled with the local inhabitants. If one could actually trace the genealogies of today’s Palestinians, one would likely find, among the larger mix, descendants of the ancient Philistines, as well as numerous other peoples that inhabited the land at one time or another, including the Christian crusaders. Israelis, those both of European stock and from Arab lands, can also be said to walk in the footsteps of time-honored ancestors.

What rights if any can be derived from such “historic” associations? Even before biblical revisionism became popular, Palestinian nationalists and their Arab supporters trumpeted the ancient Canaanites as their forebears. The connection was twofold: By originating in the Arabian Peninsula (see chapter 2), as modern Arabs claim (based in part on medieval Arabic genealogies), the Canaanites could all be considered Arabs. By eventually settling in the land now called Palestine, they could also be considered Palestinians. In contrast, the Zionist settlers from Europe are declared the descendants of the Khazars, Turkic peoples who converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages. These transplanted Europeans are clearly interlopers, a people without a history in the land they claim as that of their forefathers. Israelis from Arab lands may be native to the wider region, but they too lack proper claims to Palestine, as they are descended from a nonindigenous people who usurped the land from its Palestinian owners, first during the Persian period and then again following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. It comes as no surprise then that the minimalists have found favor among Arabs in the West who have read or perused their current literature. The same is true for more worldly audiences in the Arab world itself. Thompson has been translated into Arabic, Whitlam and others are sure to follow. It is only a matter of time before biblical minimalism becomes the accepted currency of so many Arab intellectuals, Palestinians and non-Palestinians alike.

At the seventh annual Jerusalem Day Symposium held in Amman in 1996, an event sponsored by Prince al-Hasan and devoted to “Western scholarship and the history of Palestine,” Thompson, Whitlam, and the theologian Michael Prior all participated. Their contributions were “Hidden Histories and the Problem of Ethnicity in Palestine” (Thompson), “Western Scholarship and the Silencing of Palestinian History” (Whitlam), and “The Moral Problem of the Land Traditions of the Bible [the basis of Israeli/Jewish claims to the Holy Land]” (Prior). Other presentations by scholars and political figures from the region included a talk in Arabic on “Canaanite Arabs, the Builders of Jerusalem and other Cities of Palestine,” (italics mine) by Mahmud al-Zu’abi, a professor of history at Damascus University. One could cite similar examples. For better or worse, the minimalist project has become linked to a political debate in which Jews and Arabs match claims and counterclaims to regions and individual sites of the Holy Land.

What bearing does an alleged Western conspiracy to sever the historic link between the indigenous peoples of Canaan and today’s Palestinians have on the politics of the region? Or to put the question somewhat differently, how would the political calculus of the Near East be changed if the minimalist position gained ascendance in Western intellectual and political circles? If the revered narrative of ancient Israel is at best an account of a world that “should” have been or, following the outspoken minimalists, nothing more than a concoction of Hellenistic times projected back onto a more distant Canaanite past, why should anyone privilege that Jewish version of history over Palestinian versions of the past? Why should well-meaning people of the West recognize Jewish claims to the Holy Land when such claims are seemingly based on unreliable and biased texts? Why not follow instead those minimalists and their supporters who completely discredit the biblical account while supporting in full the cause of Palestinian nationalism? Needless to say, all these loaded queries and the answers they demand are grist for the Arab mill.
Would be greeted as heresy among the Muslim faithful. Palestinians can well accept the minimalists when the latter link them to the ancient peoples of Canaan. They have claimed as much themselves. Indeed, they have gone further in arguing that the Canaanites originated in the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabs of Palestine can also subscribe to any theory that demeans western scholarship by seeing it to be inherently biased in favor of the Judeo-Christian tradition and, by extension, the historic claims of the Zionist movement. But they cannot in good faith jettison completely the versions of biblical persons and events that have long captivated them. Jews throughout the ages may have deliberately misread passages of their own scripture or falsified the text in an attempt to deny Muhammad's legitimacy, proof of which is contained therein, but God's earlier revelation to the Israelites cannot be denied as it was part of an ongoing prophetic saga. That saga was brought to fruition with the coming of God's last and most noble messenger, Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah from the Arab tribe of Quraysh.

Recognizing the importance of Israelite tales (Isra'iliyat) to their religious foundations, the early Muslims pursued an active interest in all sorts of Jewish memorabilia. They were no doubt titillated by accounts of the ancient Israelites and read the richly textured Arabic versions with much interest and profit. Intellectual curiosity alone does not account, however, for the extensive and sustained intellectual concern with ancient Israel. In pursuing the Jewish past, Muslim religious authorities were not interested in new and more broadly defined insights about the general nature of religious experience. The tales of the Israelites were not considered arcane legends, the sort of material that draws attention from modern folklorists or scholars of comparative religion. In outlook, the Muslim authorities resembled more closely the friars of the Christian West, learned men who saw themselves, first and foremost, as defenders of the true faith.

Muslims delved into the Jewish past because they thought it directly linked to the course of their own history and was important to their ideals, practices, and moral behavior. The Hebrew Bible, properly explicated, foretold the coming of the Prophet Muhammad. Similarly, postbiblical Jewish tradition predicted events taking place during the time of his successors, the Commanders of the Faithful. The manner in which the Israelites comported themselves was also an indication of how people with a revealed text can fail to comply with the ways of Allah. Seen through Islamic lenses, the Jewish "other" became a yardstick by which the Muslims measured themselves and measured their ummah against an older and less worthy monotheist community. Unlike the early Muslim polity, which represented a transcendent ideal for all generations of Muslims, the Banu Isra'il, or
"people of Israel," were constantly rebelling against their God. They were truly a "stiff-necked" people, or as Muslims would have it a "thick-hearted" people. Proof of Israel's unworthiness, found often in a Jewish tradition that is intensely self-critical, was quoted liberally by Muslims. Such quotes continue to flavor Muslim polemics in their hostile engagement with Jews and the modern State of Israel. Thus, current Arab scholars who focus on the Hebrew Bible are inclined to demonstrate how particular passages are linked to Zionist ideology and behavior. Properly understood, Jewish scripture illuminates Israel's aggressive political aims and policies. For Muslims, to deny the biblical account as they understand it is to surrender both the underpinnings of their own beliefs and the material from which they fashioned and continue to fashion their images of Jews, Judaism, and more recently, the Zionist project.

Such as it is, Arab interest in the ancient Near East is linked everywhere to the modern nation state. Virtually all countries in the region sponsor their own excavations and license digs by foreign archeologists. These modern polities promote themselves as heirs to civilizations that graced their national domains prior to Islam. Even before a Palestinian state has been established, the current authority that rules in Gaza and areas of the West Bank has moved, however slowly, toward creating a full-fledged department of antiquities. Turning to the pre-Islamic world in search of nationhood and national symbols has an undeniable logic. How else would Iraqis, Jordanians, Lebanese, and now Palestinians, among others, create a deep-rooted and unifying sense of nationality where nations as we now know them never existed until recent times? Nevertheless, claiming ancient cultures that are foreign and distant as one's own, or even seeking to understand those cultures on their own terms, is a formidable undertaking. Islam defines the basic identity of the overwhelming majority of Arabs. As a rule, traditional Muslims have never related to a pagan pre-Islamic past, let alone claimed it for themselves. During the formative period of Islam, there was considerable curiosity about the world of the ancients, particularly that of the Greeks and the Israelites. The former provided Muslim thinkers with the so-called Greek sciences: philosophy, medicine, geography, astronomy, and mathematics, but they did not provide templates of moral or religious behavior. The Israelites provided Muslims with truth of the Prophet's mission, predictions of future events in the world of Islam, and an earlier monotheist history that bore studying, but all that was preparation for the quintessential Islam to follow.

Although many Arabs now express a renewed interest in the ancient world, that interest has not led to widespread and sustained scholarly en-

query such as exists in the universities and research institutes of the West. Palestinian intellectuals, stressing Arab links to Canaan’s ancient people, may appreciate the significance of ruins and remote histories as political symbols, but they have yet to turn that appreciation into a serious engagement with the languages and cultures of the past. Arabs who trumpet the importance of their Canaanite forebears show little interest in text-critical scholarship. The study of ancient Canaan in the Western academy—which includes Israel’s universities—ordinarily demands a knowledge of Hebrew, a command of several other Near Eastern languages, a familiarity with the literary legacy of the native peoples of Canaan, as well as training in comparative Semitic linguistics and grammar. None of these subjects is the strong suit of Arab universities. The few able Arab scholars who have made serious attempts to master these disciplines were mostly trained in foreign institutions.

At best, Arab primary and secondary schools pay lip service to the pre-Islamic history of the region. Unlike Israel’s schoolchildren who are immersed in a biblical tradition that Jews have read and reread in the original language for well over two millennia, their Palestinian counterparts are not required to study, year in and year out, an ancient world they have only recently adopted as their own. The failure to focus more directly on Canaan and its history is not surprising. However much Muslim Palestinians embrace the Canaanite past, the history that has defined their identity for a thousand years and more is the rise of Islam and the Arab conquest of the seventh century. That all-powerful link between Arab Muslims and the Islamic past overshadows every other human experience.