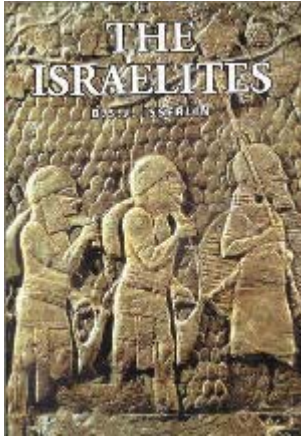


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Isserlin, B. S. J.

The Israelites

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Who were the Israelites? For many the answer to this question may be self-evident. Yet in a variety of ways this question has been the source of some of the greatest uncertainty and debate among biblical scholars over the past one hundred years. Aside from the well-known debate over the historical reliability of the biblical texts, there is the fact that what the Hebrew Bible does contain provides little information about the daily life of the majority of Israelites. In *The Israelites* Isserlin attempts to provide the reader with a description of life in ancient Israel beyond the walls of the royal court. He introduces the work by stating that he plans “to offer as concise a picture of Israel and her intellectual and material culture as emerges from the combined study of the Bible, extra-biblical texts and archaeology, in the light of recent scholarship.” While many have sought to utilize both archaeology and biblical studies to compile histories of ancient Israel or historical atlases of ancient Palestine, none have attempted to be as comprehensive as Isserlin has within this work. Following the requisite chapters covering geography and history, Isserlin covers a breadth of topics ranging from social structures to agriculture and trade to religion and art, which are divided into three major sections: “The Stage and the Players,” “The Material Culture,” and “The World of the Spirit.”

Of the three sections, section 1 is likely to draw the most criticism. It is here that Isserlin deals with the origins and history of the Israelites. Isserlin is certainly aware of the historical problems with the biblical texts and the diversity of opinion concerning the history of Israel. Yet while he rejects the so-called “Albrightean synthesis,” he clearly

prefers a “maximalist” approach to the biblical materials. This is perhaps most evident in his presentation of Israel’s history, which strictly follows the biblical account and which contains frequent references to specific biblical texts. Specifically, while acknowledging the various critical arguments to the contrary, he argues for an identifiable “patriarchal age” in the first half of the second millennium and for a thirteenth-century exodus. Yet while he does therefore argue for the origin of Israel outside of Palestine, he also finds value in Finkelstein’s view of the archaeology of the settlement. Thus while Isserlin attempts to offer a balanced presentation of the origins and history of Israel, the reader is likely to desire more specific arguments in support of Isserlin’s positions as well as discussion concerning particular weaknesses that he detects in opposing views.

Isserlin follows this with a discussion of Israelite social and political structures. Here again Isserlin is heavily dependent on the biblical material, though he does a good job of incorporating the archaeological evidence as illustration and support. A significant weakness in this section is the lack of application of social-scientific methods to his study. His explanations of various social and political phenomena often seem primarily theological in nature. For example, he demonstrates a strong dependence on covenant theology as the main formative force within Israelite society without discussing the internal and external social, political, and economic forces at work behind the biblical texts.

Whereas section 1 draws primarily from the biblical material, section 2 focuses primarily on the archaeological record and what it tells us about Israel’s material culture. Here there are thorough and quite interesting discussions of town planning and architecture of various types of buildings. Perhaps the best chapter in this section is Isserlin’s excellent treatment of “Industries and Crafts,” which is organized by the various trades and discusses both the place each held within Israel and the role each played in the larger international commerce. This section provides the lay reader with an excellent introduction to the vocabulary of archaeology as well as the types of archaeological evidence and the process of interpreting that evidence. As is the case with the entire book, while Isserlin does mention the work of several well-published scholars, he does not provide specific references to particular publications concerning the evidence he provides, although all the standard works by these scholars are listed in the bibliography.

In the third section Isserlin explores the intellectual and spiritual world of Israel, especially as it is reflected in the material culture. In the chapter “Literature, Writing, and Texts,” Isserlin not only discusses the different types of writing within the biblical material but also explores the development of the Hebrew language through careful examination of ancient Israelite graffiti and other extrabiblical epigraphic evidence. The following chapter on Israelite religion is also particularly interesting and thorough. It is here that Isserlin has most effectively united the biblical material with detailed descriptions of the various cultic sites throughout Israel. While the primary focus here

seems to be on the cultic sites, specific biblical references are brought in to support his interpretations. In this and the following chapter on art, Isserlin succeeds in demonstrating those features that were genuinely distinct to Israel.

Isserlin is clearly well aware of the results of the latest archaeological investigation on both large and small scales. Detailed descriptions of physical evidence ranging from floor plans and city layouts to figurines and potsherds greatly enhance the portrait that Isserlin attempts to paint. The book is well illustrated with eighty-five black-and-white photos and seventy-four line drawings and maps, though there are few references within the text to specific illustrations. A fully subdivided bibliography at the end of the book directs the reader to more detailed research. There is little here that will be unfamiliar to advanced students of ancient Israel, and the lack of reference citations throughout the text also limits its usefulness for scholarly research. Yet Isserlin has provided an excellent introduction to a wide variety of topics related to ancient Israel that provide a beginning student with a wealth of judicious research into the biblical record and archaeological evidence. Isserlin candidly discusses the usefulness and limits of both and acknowledges areas in which uncertainty still exists. The book would thus be an excellent supplementary text for introductory courses in ancient Israel and a valuable reference resource for anyone interested in beginning or continuing a study of the ancient Israelites.