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Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion
in Honor of

R. E. Friedman

on His Sixtieth Birthday

Edited by

SHAWNA DOLANSKY

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Contents

Richard Elliott Friedman: An Appreciation	ix
WILLIAM H. C. PROPP	
Abbreviations	xi
Introduction	xiii
SHAWNA DOLANSKY	

Part 1 The Hebrew Bible

Ezekiel and the Levites	3
JACOB MILGROM	
Framing Aaron: Incense Altar and Lamp Oil in the Tabernacle Texts	13
CAROL MEYERS	
Necromancy and 1 Samuel 19:22	23
W. RANDALL GARR	
A Tale of the Prophet and the Courtier: A Responsive Reading of the Nathan Texts	33
HERBERT BARDWELL HUFFMON	
A Forgotten Cultic Reform? 2 Kings 3:2b	43
ANDRÉ LEMAIRE	
Scribal Error and the Transmission of 2 Kings 18–20 and Isaiah 36–39	51
BRADLEY ROOT	
Empirical Taxonomy and the Hebrew Bible	61
A. DEAN FORBES	
Place-Names as Superlatives in Classical Hebrew	73
H. G. M. WILLIAMSON	
The Real Formal Full Personal Name of the God of Israel	81
DAVID NOEL FREEDMAN ב"ר	

Part 2 Source Criticism

<i>Leitwort</i> Style and Literary Structure in the J Primeval Narrative	93
RONALD HENDEL	
How Moses Gained and Lost the Reputation of Being the Torah's Author: Higher Criticism prior to Julius Wellhausen	111
MICHAEL M. HOMAN	

- How Was the Bible Written? Reflections on Sources and
 Authors in the Book of Kings 133
 ROBERT R. WILSON

Part 3
Israel and the
Ancient Near East

- The “Biblical” Origins of Passover 147
 JEFFREY C. GEOGHEGAN
- “Plowing with a Heifer” in Judges 14:18:
 Tracing a Sexual Euphemism 163
 SHALOM M. PAUL
- Aramean Skin Care: A New Perspective on Naaman’s Leprosy 169
 LAURA M. ZUCCONI
- Abraham and Damascus in Some Greek and Latin Texts
 of the Hellenistic Period 179
 JOHN A. EMERTON
- Rethinking Sectarian Judaism: The Centrality of the Priesthood
 in the Second Temple Period 195
 RISA LEVITT KOHN AND REBECCA MOORE

Part 4
The Bible and
Archaeology

- In Defense of Forgery 217
 BARUCH HALPERN
- Can Archaeology Serve as a Tool in Textual Criticism
 of the Hebrew Bible? 225
 WILLIAM G. DEVER
- “You Shall Make for Yourself No Molten Gods”: Some Thoughts
 on Archaeology and Edomite Ethnic Identity 239
 THOMAS E. LEVY
- Female Infanticide in Iron II Israel and Judah 257
 BETH ALPERT NAKHAI

Part 5
Religion and
Religious Studies

- Elements of Popular Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern
 Jewish Psalms Commentary 275
 ALAN COOPER

The Biblical Icon	293
STEPHEN COX	
Walter Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel Movement, and How Julius Wellhausen Unwittingly Helped Create American Progressivism in the Twentieth Century	315
STEVEN CASSEDY	
“Starving” the Patient: A Jewish Perspective on Terry Schiavo and the Feeding Tube Controversy	325
RANDY LINDA STURMAN ב״ד	
Indexes	331
Index of Authors	331
Index of Scripture	339

*“You Shall Make for Yourself
No Molten Gods”:
Some Thoughts on Archaeology
and Edomite Ethnic Identity*

THOMAS E. LEVY

University of California, San Diego

From an anthropological perspective, when conducting Iron Age archaeology in the southern Levant, it is essential to use the Hebrew Bible as an ethnohistorical document to penetrate the murky waters that cloud the identity of the peoples who lived in the region during the 2nd millennium B.C.E. The Bible, along with other ancient Near Eastern texts such as inscriptions, papyri, scrolls, cuneiform tablets and so on, provide the key historical data for elucidating the ethnic identity of the peoples whose material remains make up the archaeological record of the “Holy Land” (Schniedewind 2005). However, ethnicity is reflected in material culture in terms of symbols, food consumption patterns, settlement patterns, and other domains. Just how much history is embedded in the Hebrew Bible, other ancient Near Eastern texts, or ancient historical texts in general is a contentious debate that goes beyond the scope of this chapter (Halpern 2001; 2005; Levy 2000; Moreland 2001; Thompson 1999). However, by viewing the Bible as ethnohistory—an approach that uses both historical and ethnographic data as its foundation—a more robust picture of the past is possible, one that addresses both the historicity of parts of the Hebrew Bible as well as some of the anthropological processes that may have shaped the past. From an archaeological perspective, examining the Bible as an ethnohistorical document paves the way for bridging text and archaeology.

Ethnohistory uses historical methods and materials that go beyond the standard approach to the analyses of books and manuscripts by weaving

Author's note: This paper is offered in honor of my dear friend and colleague Richard Elliott Friedman to mark his 60th birthday. I am grateful to Bill Propp for discussing this paper with me and his erudite insights on biblical history. Thanks also to Alina Levy for many useful conversations concerning the Iron Age and Edom. However, the author is responsible for any errors herein.

together a variety of source materials including any material evidence of the past such as maps, music, paintings, photography, folklore, oral tradition, ecology, site exploration, archaeological materials, museum collections, folk customs, language, and place names (Axtell 1979). In many respects, ethnohistory is similar to the interdisciplinary approach that characterizes the French *Annales* school of historiography (Braudel 1976), an approach that is particularly useful for historical archaeologists (Knapp 1992; Levy and Holl 1998; Stager 1988). According to N. Lurie (1961), ethnohistorians utilize the special knowledge of the group, linguistic insights, and the understanding of cultural phenomena in ways that make for a more in-depth analysis of the past than more normative historical approaches that are based solely on written documents produced by and for one group. It is in this context that we will dip into the Hebrew Bible and examine a passage from Exodus that has bearing on the ethnogenesis of ancient Israel and their neighbors, the Edomites. In what follows, I suggest that Edomite ethnogenesis was an evolving process that began as early as the 13th–12th centuries B.C.E. when the inhabitants of Edom were known as Shasu by the ancient Egyptians and continued throughout the Iron Age when the Edomites interacted with the Israelites, Judeans, Assyrians, and other cultural groups in the region.

A Glimpse of Ethnogenesis in the Southern Levant

Exodus 34:17 You shall make for yourself no molten gods. (RSV)

אַל־תִּהְיֶה מִסְכָּה לָא תַעֲשֶׂהָ לָךְ

How do we make the leap from Exod 34:17 to Edomite identity? We begin by touching on the notion of *ethnogenesis*, a concept that refers to the construction of group identity as well as the revival or perseverance of cultural features of a people undergoing rapid change (Seymour-Smith 1986). It may also be used to refer to a new ethnic system emerging out of an amalgamation of other groups. Ethnogenesis is a powerful conceptual model that can help explain the emergence of ancient Israel in Canaan (Faust 2006; Levy and Holl 2002), because it focuses on viewing ethnicity as a form of *resistance* to other cultural groups. The role of resistance in ancient Israel's ethnogenesis has been carefully studied in a recent volume by A. Faust (2006), where he argues that resistance to other social groups played a key role in the formation of a separate Israelite identity.

I suggest that early Israel's prohibition on making molten metallic gods was part of the ethnogenesis process that involved a myriad of new cultural behaviors that were aimed at creating a separate (Israelite) ethnic identity. This is not to say that the Israelite decision to embrace aniconism happened out of the blue. As discussed by T. N. D. Mettinger (1995) and

W. H. C. Propp (2006), aniconism was common in the ancient Near East. However, the production of molten metal images of god(s) (Negbi 1976) was part and parcel of other contemporary peoples' ethnic identity, from which the ancient Israelites were struggling to separate themselves. The prohibition on making molten images of god(s) is part of what some scholars refer to as the "Cultic Decalogue" (found in Exod 34:17–28), which establishes a number of decrees concerning sacrifice, pilgrimage, and other behaviors that contribute to making ancient Israel a separate ethnic entity. As Faust (2006) points out, Israelite resistance to the Philistines, a group they acknowledged as having a monopoly on iron production, is emblematic of how important it was for the Israelites to distance themselves from metal production and metalwork. The Philistine monopoly of production of iron tools and weaponry is seen in the following Biblical text:

1 Samuel 13:19 Now there was no smith to be found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Philistines said, "Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears." (RSV)
 19 וְהָרֶשֶׁת לֹא יִמָּצָא בְּכָל אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־ (אָמַר) [אָמְרוּ] פְּלִשְׁתִּים פֶּן יַעֲשׂוּ הָעִבְרִים חֶרֶב
 אוֹ חַנִּית

This is not to say that metallurgy of some kind was never practiced by Israelite groups (Muhly 1976; 1984; Waldbaum 1999). For example, in the 12th–11th-century B.C.E. levels at Tel Dan, an assemblage of stone circles and ash pits associated with tuyeres, crucibles, slag, and metal pieces were discovered in Courtyard 7026 in Stratum VI and Courtyard 7061 in Stratum V, generally associated with the latter part of the 12th century B.C.E. following the assumed conquest of Laish (Biran 1994). According to the archaeometallurgist S. Shalev (1993), this industry consisted of the production of copper-based tin-bronze objects. The presence of numerous broken bronze artifacts in the area around crucibles, as well as the tin content in the metal objects compared to the tin content in the slag, indicated remelting of scrap. According to Shalev (1993), this was a simple recycling system of metal work that did not even rely on imported metal ingots for manufacturing prestige and/or luxury objects. An important small-scale 9th-century B.C.E. iron smithy workshop was found recently by Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman at Tel Beth Shemesh in the upper Shephela (Bunimovitz and Lederman 2003). However, while some metal production took place in Israel to produce utilitarian goods, the numerous allusions to the prohibition of using metal (and other materials) to make idols (for example, Exod 20:4; 34:17; Deut 9:12; 27:15; Judg 17:3, 4; 18:17; and others) and the rarity of metal production evidence from sites in ancient Israel add weight to the idea that metal production was not a significant part of ancient Israel's economy or identity.

According to Friedman (2001: 292), “Only after the golden calf incident is the commandment added: Don’t make molten gods (*massekah*)! If there was any doubt about their permissibility before, there is none now. In the wake of that event, no such statue is ever to be made again.” For Friedman, after the golden calf episode, no molten icon is ever to be made again. While the antiquity of the Hebrew Bible in its present form is generally accepted to date from ca. 7th–6th centuries B.C.E. (Friedman 1988), the deep-time stories that relate to Israel’s formative period at the end of the Late Bronze/Iron Age I period reflected in Exod 34:17 and 1 Sam 13:19 represent what W. G. Dever (2001) refers to as *convergences* between the Hebrew Bible and the archaeological record of the southern Levant, as noted above. The situation in neighboring Edom concerning metallurgy is markedly different from its neighbor to the northwest.

Metal Production and Identity in Ancient Edom

Edom, the region generally associated with the area south of the Wadi Hasa, east of the Wadi Arabah, and north of the Wadi Hisma in southern Jordan, represents the territory of one of ancient Israel’s most important neighbors. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *Edom* is mentioned some 99 times and *Seir* 39 times. While often antagonistic, the relations between Edom and Israel were rooted in their common ancestry (Bartlett 1989). Excavations and surveys carried out by the University of California, San Diego, and Department of Antiquities of Jordan in the lowlands of Edom, in the copper ore rich Faynan district some 50 km south of the Dead Sea, have revealed significant new data concerning the evolution of Iron Age societies in Edom. These new data that have a direct bearing on the formation of Edomite ethnic identity and indirectly on that of ancient Israel (figs. 1–2). Some of the most important data come from excavations in the Iron Age cemetery at Wadi Fidan 40 that suggest that the buried population represents a nomadic pastoral group, possibly related to the Shasu nomads known from contemporary and older ancient Egyptian texts (Kitchen 1992; Levy, Adams, and Shafiq 1999; Levy 2004). Long ago, R. Givon (1969–70; 1971) suggested that the early Israelite tribes had their origin in the social group known to the ancient Egyptians as the *Shasu*—an Egyptian term very similar to the generic concept of *Bedouin*—but linked specifically to the geographic region of Seir/Edom (Ward 1972). For reasons too long to detail here, I accept this hypothesis, as does A. Rainey (2001; and others). Here, I would like to emphasize that the Israelite prohibition of making molten gods or images of God may originate in the process of ethnogenesis—an attempt by earliest tribal Israel to form a separate ethnic identity, distinct from its ancestral roots in the supratribal confederation of Shasu nomads from whence they emerged somewhere in northwest Arabia/

southern Jordan. As part of the Shasu “supra-chieftdom,” the hypothesis proposed here views ancient Israel as one of the tribal or chiefdom organizations known from the Hebrew Bible that may have included interrelated nomadic groups such as the Kenizzites, Midianites, Horites, Qenites, and others that lived in this part of northwest Arabia (Rothenberg 1999; Weinfeld 1987). While we have provisionally labeled the ethnic affiliation of the population buried in the WFD 40 cemetery as “Shasu,” as more research is carried out in the Faynan district, it may be possible to discover epigraphic data with the name or term that the local people themselves used to refer to their ethnic identity. What is important to bear in mind here is the fact that the massive WFD 40 cemetery demonstrates the presence of a large Iron Age population of pastoral nomads inhabiting the copper ore rich Faynan district. In addition, this district is a part of the region of Seir/Edom from whence the god *Yah* emerged, possibly the same god called *YHWH* by ancient Israel (Giveon 1971). If this linkage is correct, it implies that ancient Israel had significant roots among the tribal nomadic peoples that inhabited northwest Arabia, that they adopted the god *YHWH* into their tradition from this region, but that they distanced themselves from metalworking, which was such a central part of the cultural world of the Iron Age inhabitants of Edom.

Evidence of Iron Age metal production in the lowlands of Edom was suggested long ago by N. Glueck (1940) based on his surveys in Transjordan, and more thoroughly demonstrated through systematic surveys and excavations by the author and others in the Faynan district such as the German Mining Museum, Council of British Research in the Levant (CBRL) (Barker et al. 2000), the Jabal Hamrat Fidan (JHF) (Levy et al. 2003; Levy et al. 2004), and the new UCSD–Department of Antiquities of Jordan Edom Lowland Regional Archaeology Project (ELRAP; Levy and Najjar 2006; Levy, Najjar, and Higham 2005). Here I will highlight two metallurgical discoveries from our excavations at the largest Iron Age metal production site in the Faynan district (and the southern Levant) called Khirbat en-Nahas, located on the south bank of the Wadi al-Guwayb and carried out as part of the JHF and ELRAP projects¹ (figs. 1–2). These finds add important data in support

1. I am grateful to the 2002 excavation team: Co-Principal Investigator Russell Adams (and ceramic analyst); Co-Director Mohammad Najjar; Senior Surveyor James Anderson; Area Supervisors Yoav Arbel, Lisa Soderbaum, and Elizabeth Monroe; GIS specialist and ceramics analyst Neil Smith; Archaeozoologist Adolfo Muniz; Administrator Alina Levy; Camp Manager Aladdin Mahdi; and the many other staff, students, and Bedouin workers who helped on the project. These excavations were part of the 1997–2002 Jabal Hamrat Fidan project sponsored by the University of California, San Diego, and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. I would like to thank Dr. Fawaz al-Khraysheh, Director General of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, and Dr. Pierre Bikai, former Director of ACOR, Amman, Jordan, for their logistical support. Finally, I am grateful to the C. Paul Johnson Family Charitable Foundation (Chicago and Napa, CA) for their generous support. For the



Fig. 1. The Iron Age Four-Chamber Gate excavated at Khirbet en-Nahas, Jordan, in 2006. Excavations carried out as part of the Jabal Hamrat Fidan Project, UCSD–Department of Antiquities of Jordan. Photo by T. E. Levy—Levantine Archaeology Laboratory, UCSD.

of the hypothesis that metallurgy was a key attribute in the ethnogenesis of the inhabitants of Edom, whose character traits the earliest Israelites were keen to distance themselves from in their own process of ethnogenesis.

I would like to offer the hypothesis that there is a convergence between the biblical passages related to the 9th-century Judean king Jehoram, generally dated to ca. 848–841 B.C.E. (Rogerson 1999: 128–29), and the archaeological record at Khirbet en-Nahas. Accordingly, in 2 Kgs 8:20 we learn that during the reign of Jehoram (also called Joram)

In his days Edom revolted from the rule of Judah, and set up a king of their own. (RSV)

בַּיָּמָיו פָּשַׁע אֲדוֹם מִתַּחַת יְדֵי־הַוְּדָה²¹ וַיִּמְלִכוּ עֲלֵיהֶם מֶלֶךְ²⁰

2006 ELRAP excavations, I am grateful to my colleague and codirector, Mohammad Najjar, and research collaborators Lisa Tauxe, Andreas Hauptmann, and Tom Higham. Thanks especially to field staff members: Yoav Arbel, Adolfo Muniz, Neil Smith, Erez Ben Yosef, Marc Beherec, Kyle Knabb, Aaron Gidding, Caroline Hebron, Alina Levy, and Mohammad Defala. Funding was provided by NSF Grant 0636051, National Geographic Society grant 8095-06, Jerome and Mariam Katzin, Institute for Aegean Prehistory, Ramesh Rao, and the California Institute of Telecommunications and Information Technology (*Calit2*) at UCSD.

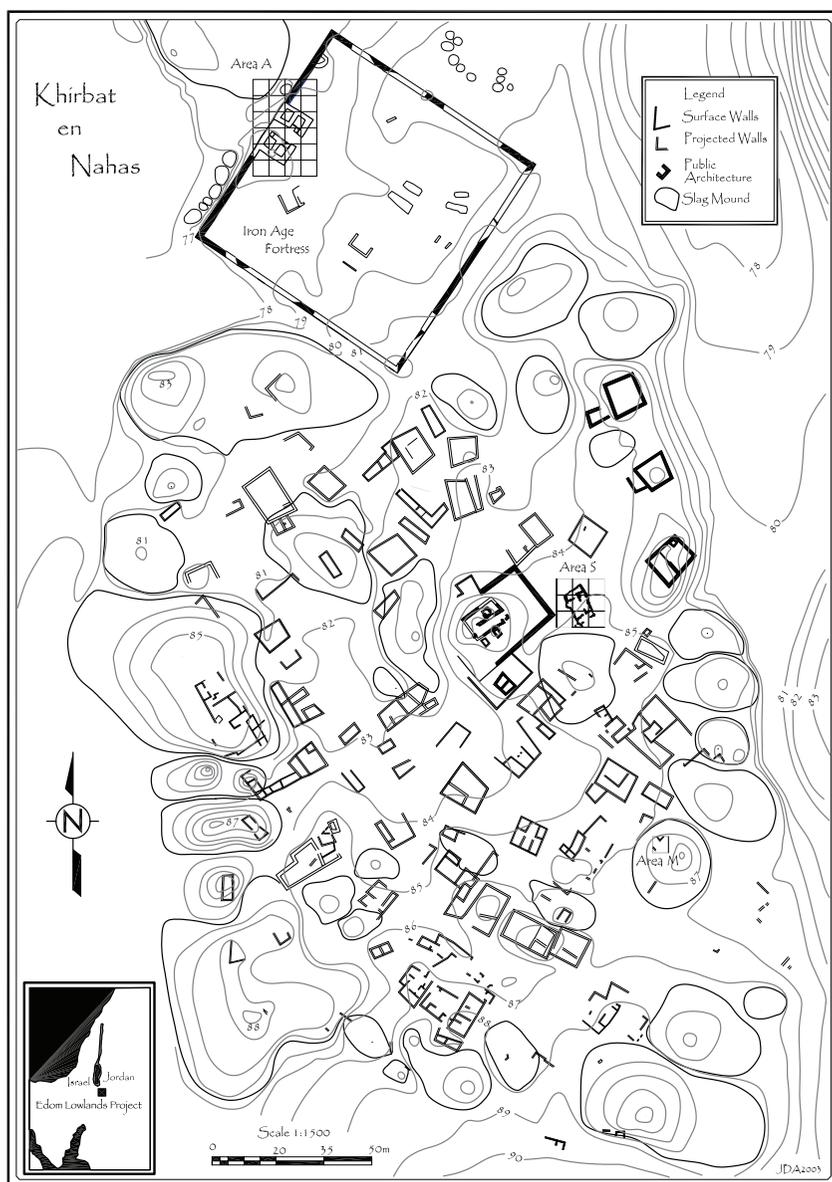


Figure 2. Topographic map and overview of the Iron Age architecture visible on the site surface at Khirbat en-Nahas, Jordan. The fortress is visible in the upper portion of the map and Area S in the middle. Source: Levy, Adams, Najjar, et al. 2004.

The point of drawing on this biblical passage concerning the 9th-century Edomite revolt is that one of the revolt's end products may have been to encourage Edomite metallurgical intensification as a way of solidifying their economic and political independence. In the same way that the prohibition of making molten images and subsequent paucity of Israelite metal production was a hallmark of their ethnogenesis, the Edomites—living in the richest copper ore resource zone of the southern Levant—enthusiastically embraced metal production. This is an archaeological interpretation based on the distribution of Iron Age metal production sites in the lowlands of Edom as well as evidence for the production of metal idols mentioned below.

In a recent in-depth study of the ceramics from Khirbat en-Nahas, both the 10th- and 9th-century B.C.E. assemblages are dominated by local “Edomite” styles and fabrics (Smith and Levy forthcoming). Given the overwhelming indications of an “Edomite” material culture in the 9th century B.C.E., one can assume that the reorganization of the site at this time was significantly connected to this cultural group.

How is it possible to identify archaeological evidence of a social process, such as a revolt, against an oppressor? Y. Arbel (2005) has outlined a wide range of archaeological correlates for the first Jewish Revolt (ca. 66–73 C.E.) against the Romans in Palestine. However, there are detailed and numerous descriptions of that revolt in the writings of Josephus (1976). In the case of the 9th-century B.C.E. Edomite revolt against Judah, we are left with only a one-line allusion to a major formative “historical” event mentioned in the Hebrew Bible concerning the formation or reconstitution of the Edomite Kingdom. However, we are at liberty to refer to the Edomite revolt as a historic event because, as B. Halpern has shown in *The First Historians* (1988), the biblical writers “had authentic antiquarian intentions” and adhered to the sources they had (cf. Dever 2001: 271). Further, Halpern (1988: 111–13) argues that the Deuteronomists were as much authentic “historians” as Herodotus, Thucydides, and other ancient writers. When examining the Hebrew Bible for issues of historicity, historical data especially reveals itself when dealing with the mundane (Levy et al. 2005). Thus, there is no reason for the biblical writers to record a loss or in this case a failure of one of the Judean kings unless it was indeed a historic event. What then would be some of the archaeological correlates of the Edomite revolt against their Judean overlords?

The 9th-Century B.C.E. Reorganization of Metal Production at Khirbat en-Nahas

The 2002 excavations at Khirbat en-Nahas (KEN) focused on two major areas at this massive copper metal production center: the fortress (Area A)

and one of the buildings devoted to processing slag and other metallurgical activities (Area S) [fig. 2]. Following his surveys in Edom during the 1930s, N. Glueck (1940: 60–61) attributed the construction of the fortress at Khirbat en-Nahas to King Solomon. Over 60 years later, and in spite of the modern systematic surveys and excavations carried out at the site, this hypothesis remains both speculative and in need of further testing. Indeed, the historicity of Solomon remains a highly contentious issue (cf. Levy et al. 2005). That said, as a working hypothesis, let us assume that the fortress was constructed by 10th-century B.C.E. Israelites who, as Glueck (1940) suggested, may have used the fortress as a large prison camp to work the mines. According to the patristic literature, during the Late Roman period, slaves (both Christians and criminals) were forced to work the mines in the Faynan district. In this context, the new archaeological data from KEN for the 9th century B.C.E. provide possible convergences between text and Iron Age material culture. A total of 21 radiocarbon dates from 9th-century B.C.E. strata were processed for both the fortress and Area S building at the Oxford and Groningen radiocarbon laboratories (Levy et al. 2004; Levy et al. 2005). Here we will only discuss the results from the fortress excavations. The Iron Age fortress at KEN measures 73 × 73 meters and is one of the largest in the southern Levant desert zone (Levy et al. 2005). Originally constructed in the 10th century B.C.E. (Stratum A3), the Four-Chamber Gate passageway was sealed and the guard rooms (only 2 have been excavated to date; fig. 1) were reused for smelting copper during the 9th century B.C.E. (Strata A2b and A2a). As shown by the radiocarbon dating and associated Bayesian analysis of the dates from the stratigraphic deposits associated with the gate (Higham et al. 2005), Stratum A2b (that follows the gate construction in Stratum A3) represents intensified metal production activities that appear to have begun after the mid-9th century B.C.E. (890–860 B.C.E. [37.1% probability] or 855–830 B.C.E. [31.1%]).² Our team modeled the spans of time associated with each of the strata excavated in Area A and found that each was relatively brief (fig. 3). Stratum A3, for example, spanned only 0–10 years (at 68.2% probability) and indicates that the actual use of the monumental fortress was quite short. Both Strata A2b and A2a, like the preceding A3, appear to be relatively brief phases of activity (see fig. 3b; Higham et al. 2005). Our analysis indicates that activity in this part of the site, as represented by the uppermost boundary probability distribution, ended before the first few decades of the end of the 9th century B.C.E. (i.e., before 835–795 B.C.E. [68.2%]). The most recent (2006) excavations and analyses of radiocarbon dates from Khirbat en-Nahas support the

2. I want to thank Tom Higham for his help with the radiocarbon dating project of Khirbat en-Nahas. The Bayesian statistical study referred to here was carried out by Higham.

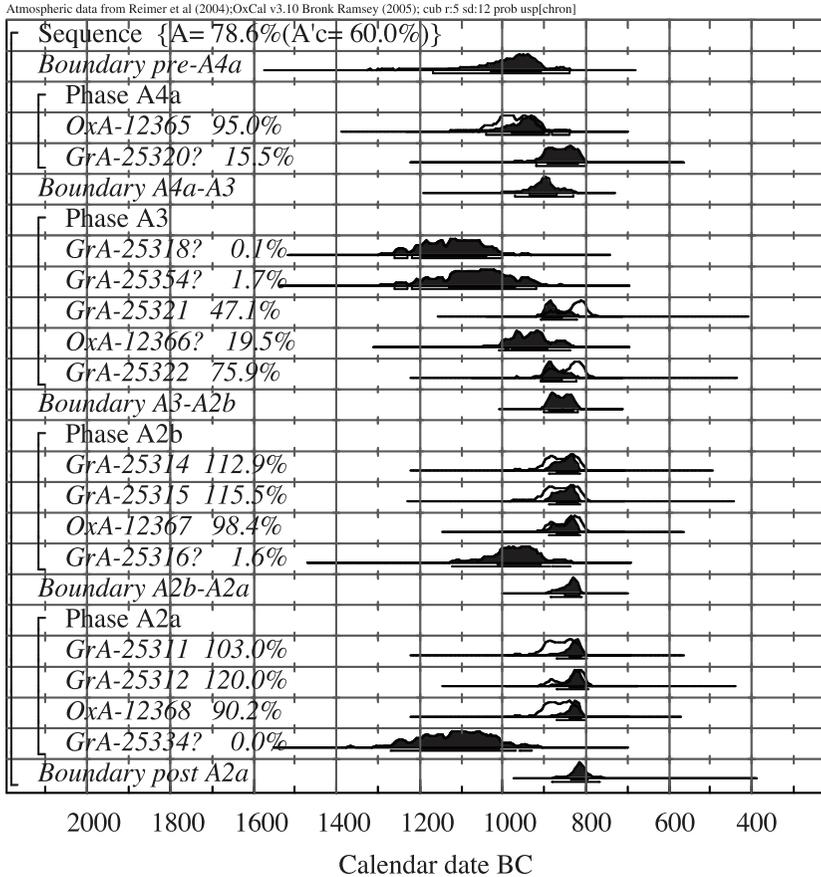


Fig. 3a. Final Bayesian model for the Area A Four-Chamber Gate at Khirbat en-Nahas, Jordan. Note: the calibrated B.C.E. dates are listed along the X axis (2002 excavations, source: Higham et al. 2005: 170).

2002 excavation results (Levy et al. forthcoming). Most important for our considerations here is the evidence for intensive industrial-scale Iron Age metal production during both the 10th and the 9th centuries B.C.E.

According to the working hypothesis suggested here, the monumental Iron Age fortress at KEN may have been intentionally sealed and decommissioned by the Edomites following their revolt against Jehoram, generally dated to ca. 848–841 B.C.E. There was no need for penal architecture in the new Edomite order. The Edomite decision to abandon using the fortress as a military/penal installation may have been tied to the Edomites' desire

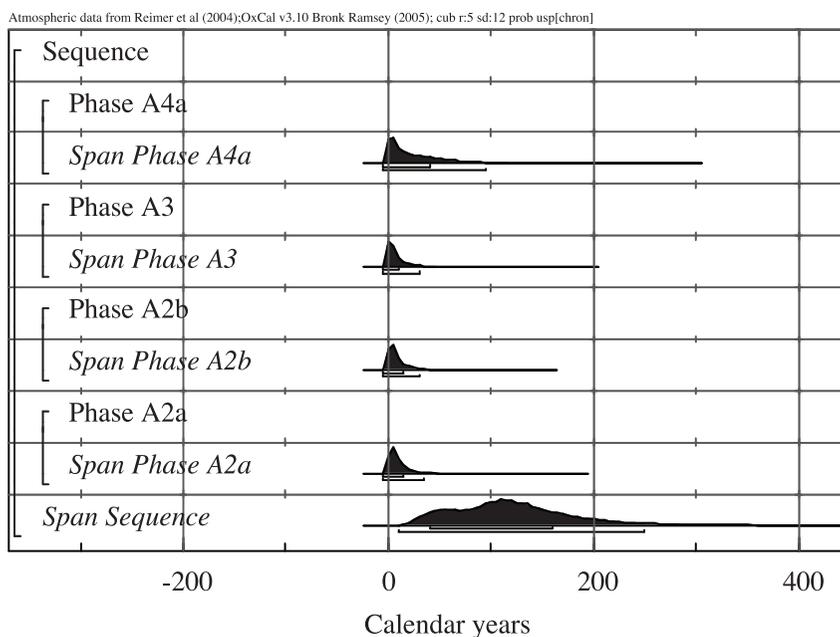


Fig. 3b. Probability distributions for the span of time in years for each of the four phases in the Area A fortress at Khirbat en-Nahas (2002 excavations, source: Higham et al. 2005: 171).

to put all energy and resources into expanding the mid-9th-century B.C.E. copper industry at KEN as quickly as possible while the Judean oppressors licked their wounds back in Judah following their retreat from Edom in the wake of the revolt. It is important to note that, to date, the slag mounds investigated by the German Mining Museum at KEN have been radiocarbon dated to two main phases of production—the 12th–11th and 10th–9th centuries B.C.E. (Hauptmann 2000)—and that our excavations have produced similar results. However, given the fact that (1) the Area S metallurgical processing building excavated by our team (Levy et al. 2005), (2) the nearby building excavated by V. Fritz under the auspices of the German Mining Museum (Fritz 1996), and (3) the decommissioning of the fortress noted here are all linked to the mid-9th century B.C.E., the proposed large-scale increase in metal production at this time is reasonable.

The rapid pace of the expansion in metal production at KEN during the 9th century B.C.E. is also marked by evidence of the production of molten images of what appears to be a goddess (fig. 4a and b). Although only a



Fig. 4a (left). Area S Stratum S1—mid-9th century B.C.E.—Clay figurine mold for casting molten image, L. 317 (B. 6323 EDM #70879). Found in association with metallurgical processing building. Only a fragment of the open mold containing the anthropomorphic figure is preserved. Length = ca. 7 cm, Width = ca. 7 cm, Thickness = ca. 4 cm.

Fig. 4b (right). Plastic cast of the mold interior. Shows face of woman with a large nose, hair, earring, and headdress. This could represent a south Levantine goddess such as the goddess Astarte, Ishtar, Kubaba, Atargatis, or some other.

fragment of a clay mold has been found in a courtyard associated with copper metal processing in Area S at the site, it is remarkable that the expansion in industrial-scale metal production was accompanied by a desire to produce what must represent a molten image destined for household consumption. When considered with other artifacts that point to ethnic identity such as food consumption patterns, ceramic assemblages, and architecture, this ideological artifact may mark a clear separation from earlier (possibly) outside managers of production at KEN to local Edomite managers. Accordingly, following their revolt against Jehoram, the formation or re-formation of the Edomite Kingdom was associated not only with the

mass production of copper for a burgeoning 9th-century B.C.E. metals market but also with household material culture ritual objects—molten images of gods—that both reflected and defined their separate ethnic identity. In this context, the quotation from Exod 34:17 that opened this essay can be seen as a significant marker in the ethnogenesis of both ancient Israel and Edom. Alternative historical reconstructions have recently been proposed by I. Finkelstein; however, these are based on misinterpretations of the archaeological record related to the fortifications at Khirbat en-Nahas (Finkelstein 2005) outlined by Levy and Najjar (2006) and on inappropriate methods of averaging and working with the radiocarbon dates from our excavations (Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2008) highlighted by our research team (Levy et al. forthcoming).

I hope that by taking an ethnohistorical perspective of the Hebrew Bible and the history of Edom, we will be able to identify some of the convergences between text and archaeology. The new archaeological excavations at Khirbat en-Nahas challenge previous assumptions about the centrality of the 7th- and 6th-century B.C.E. Assyrians (Bienkowski 1995; Bienkowski and van der Steen 2001) as responsible for the emergence of the Edomite Kingdom. Instead, the archaeological data reflect more traditional historical reconstructions by scholars such as Bartlett and others (Bartlett 1989; 1992; Kitchen 1992); however, to test convergences adequately between the Hebrew Bible and Iron Age Edom—beyond the level of proposing hypotheses as outlined here—more large-scale excavations are needed at Khirbat en-Nahas and other sites in this part of southern Jordan.

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