



EISENBRAUNS

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Saana Svärd and Agnès Garcia-Ventura, eds.,

Studying Gender in the Ancient Near East

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Factors Complicating the Reconstruction of Women's Lives in Iron Age Israel (1200–587 B.C.E.)

Beth Alpert Nakhai

1. Introduction and Overview

The confluence of extensive archaeological fieldwork and a robust textual corpus ought to be a boon to gender studies, but when it comes to reconstructing the lives of women in Iron Age Israel (1200–587 B.C.E.), it is surprising to discover that this is not always the case. When one considers the richness of Israel's archaeological record—and the extensive and partially contemporaneous text that is the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament—one might imagine that scholars seeking to reconstruct the lives of Iron Age women would find themselves in a virtual paradise—or perhaps, more appropriately, in a Garden of Eden. In some ways, the quantity of material with which one can work offers an embarrassment of riches. Salvage excavations alone have been carried out at more than 3,000 sites in Israel.¹ The Hebrew Bible names 1,426 individuals, of whom 111, such as Sarah and Hagar, are women; hundreds of other women are mentioned either individually (e.g., Noah's wife [Gen 6:18; 7:7, 13; 8:16, 18]) or collectively (e.g., the women at Sinai [Exod 19:15]), even though the Hebrew Bible does not provide their names.² Photographic archives of Ottoman and Mandate-era Palestine offer glimpses of women engaged in traditional, nonindustrialized tasks, while ethnographic studies done across the Middle East flesh out their stories—or the stories of people like them. Still, transforming this wealth of information into reconstructions that bear the weight of scholarly review is hardly a straightforward process. This essay elaborates some of the problems encountered and the opportunities offered in this complex process of sociohistorical reconstruction.

1.1. Archaeological Resources

The ancient nations of Israel and Judah were situated, approximately, within modern-day Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which together comprise an area of some 28,000 square kilometers.³ Israel is the world's most thoroughly excavated

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1. Faust and Safrai 2005: 141; Faust 2007: 30.

2. Meyers 1992: 245; Meyers, ed. 2000.

3. State of Israel (22,072 sq. km.; online: <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Spotlight/Pages/Israel-at-67-A-statistical-glimpse.aspx> [accessed January 17, 2016]); Palestinian Authority (6,020 sq. km.

nation. While Israel's archaeological record extends from the Paleolithic to near-modernity, the focus in this article is on the Iron Age (1200–587 B.C.E.), which is the era best connected with the most substantial quasi-historical segment of the Hebrew Bible. At Israel's many tels, which are its most common type of archaeological site, Iron Age settlements are commonly overlaid with meters of later occupational remains. Particularly in the modern era, as more attention is paid to post-biblical periods and to excavation methodologies, this has slowed the process of reaching Iron Age strata.

Still, Iron Age I (1200–1000 B.C.E.) remains have been detected at more than 250 small non-tel sites in the Central Highlands;⁴ Iron Age II (1000–587 B.C.E.) remains have been excavated at some 300 sites throughout Israel and Judah,⁵ and, surveys from seventh-century Judah alone have identified nearly 600 sites.⁶ The population of Israel and Judah at the peak of the Iron II is estimated at no more than 350,000 (and perhaps even fewer),⁷ while the number of excavated houses (the very setting in which evidence for women is most likely to be found) exceeds 200.⁸

1.2. *Textual Resources*

The Hebrew Bible is the lengthiest and best-preserved text from Near Eastern antiquity. Of course, its compilation into a single text took place long after the Iron Age, probably not until at least the late second or early third centuries of the Common Era. Even the composition and codification of its core, the Torah or Pentateuch (books of Genesis through Deuteronomy), was not complete until the mid-fifth century B.C.E., almost a century into the Persian period. Even so, the presence of earlier components, regardless of their date of codification, means that they retain value as witnesses to the Iron Age.

The number of extrabiblical documents that can be dated to Iron Age Israel is quite small. This can be attributed to scribes' extensive use of papyrus and parchment, which are vulnerable to the predations of time, moisture, insects, fire, and the like, for all but the very briefest of texts. No Iron Age document bearing a passage from the Hebrew Bible has been found, other than two silver amulets containing several verses from the book of Numbers (Num 6:24–26), which were excavated in a late seventh/early sixth-century burial cave at Ketef Hinnom, on the edge of Jerusalem.⁹ Additional written materials found at Iron Age sites include several small corpora of ostraca, a number of seals and seal impressions, some graffiti, and a few inscriptions,¹⁰ none of which are especially helpful for the reconstruction of women's lives.

The fact that a great many texts have been found elsewhere across the ancient Near East can be attributed to Egypt's dry climate and the Mesopotamian—and pre-Iron Age Levantine—predilection for clay as a writing surface. As valuable as these texts are for reconstructing life in the ancient Near East, as a whole they lack the Hebrew Bible's cohesive narrative thrust. The extent to which a word-count of

for the West Bank and Gaza Strip; http://www.cartercenter.org/countries/israel_and_the_palestinian_territories.html [accessed January 17, 2016]).

4. Faust and Safrai 2005: 143.

5. Faust 2010: 29.

6. Faust 2007: 24–27.

7. So Dever 1997.

8. Faust 2010: 28–29.

9. Barkay 1992; Sparks 2005: 460.

10. Schniedewind 2004: 98–106; Sparks 2005: 449–53.

the Hebrew Bible, which totals 305,497,¹¹ measures up when compared to Mesopotamian or Egyptian archives remains unclear. A decade ago, Assyriologist Anne Kilmer counted the cuneiform tablets then available for study; at that time, they totaled some half a million,¹² and the number of excavated (and plundered) tablets continues to grow.¹³ The corpus of Egyptian texts has not undergone a similar count. While the Mesopotamian and Egyptian textual corpora contain more language than the Hebrew Bible, neither has its self-contained and self-referential narrative flow.

2. *Challenges to the Reconstruction of Women's Lives*

The synthesis of these two disparate bodies of evidence, the archaeological and the biblical, in order to reconstruct the lives of Israelite women, is fraught with challenges. While some of these challenges are typical throughout Near Eastern studies, others are unique to the study of ancient Israel. It is the former, the typical or generic challenges, that are first addressed here.

2.1. *Challenges That Are Typical throughout the Field of*

Near Eastern Studies: The Focus on Historical Reconstructions

One great challenge relates to the traditional focus in Near Eastern studies, which has been the reconstruction of broad historical events. This is not surprising when one considers how little was known of the ancient Near East even as recently as a century ago. Decoding languages, correlating modern places with ancient sites, identifying cities and their rulers, establishing baseline histories, reconstructing religious practices, and figuring out society's basic parameters, all took priority. Foundational knowledge had to be acquired and the requisite skills mastered before it would become possible to reconstruct life in all its complexities. The fact that monumental architecture, whether royal or sacred, was physically prominent and tantalized archaeologists with its potential for artifactual and textual richness, added to the allure of these most traditional focuses.¹⁴

Concomitant with this has been a well-entrenched disinterest in domestic archaeology—that is, the archaeology of venues in which women were most likely to leave tangible traces in the archaeological record. Until recently, any engagement with daily life remained the by-product of chance archaeological discoveries.¹⁵ This can be attributed, in no small measure, to issues of gender and class among archaeologists. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, men from society's elite, for whom domestic concerns were best left relegated to wives and/or household staffs, dominated the field of archaeology.¹⁶ Inasmuch as they disregarded domestic concerns in

11. Freedman 1997: 519, Appendix A.

12. Personal communication, September 28, 2014.

13. According to the *Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts* (BDTNS), there are 95,700 in the 21st century alone (online: <http://bdtns.filol.csic.es/index.php?p=about> [accessed January 17, 2016]). My thanks to Agnès Garcia-Ventura for this reference.

14. For the significance of village archaeology, see Nakhai 2008.

15. For a review that documents the neglect of women in books on daily life in ancient Israel, see Nakhai 2005.

16. N. Dever (2004) documented the role of women who were wives of archaeologists but not themselves archaeologists, who worked—or did not work—alongside their husbands on Near Eastern excavations. The support provided by these women was essential to the success of their husbands' projects, even as the kinds of contributions they made were often those that their husbands would have considered "domestic," such as managing staff, students, living arrangements, and food services and creating

their own lives, they were little inclined to consider them a topic worthy of study in antiquity. In our own era, of course, not all archaeologists come from backgrounds of privilege, but Near Eastern archaeology remains male-dominated.

2.2. *Challenges That Are Typical throughout the Field of Near Eastern Studies: Women as Excavation Directors*

Recently, I quantified information about dig directors, using a somewhat imperfect database of some 200 excavation projects in 11 different countries.¹⁷ All the excavations were affiliated with the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR),¹⁸ meaning that at least one project director was North American. My research indicates that, in the past few decades, there has been an increase in the percentage of female directors or co-directors, from 0% in the late 1960s, when ASOR began keeping records, to just over 25% in the present.¹⁹ The figures are hardly different for excavations originating in Europe. Preliminary work on Middle Eastern-based projects reveals very few female directors.²⁰ The small number of women who direct field projects in the Near East offers one compelling explanation for why the study of domestic archaeology has been slow to flourish. While domestic archaeology is not—nor should it be—the exclusive domain of women, there is no denying that it is primarily women who engage in scholarship in this field.²¹ Related to the paucity of women who serve as excavation directors and senior staff members is the fact that not only research designs and excavation strategies, but also observations in the field, and the presentation and interpretation of data, are all processes in which gender plays a primary role. That is, the various stages of archaeology—strategic planning, fieldwork, analysis, interpretation, and publication—are neither neutral nor bias-free, but rather embedded with elements that make us human; among them, gender is of exceptional importance.²²

2.3. *Challenges That Are Typical throughout the Field of Near Eastern Studies: Women in Professional Archaeological Societies*

Among the most significant factors is the fact that, in the past, men have dominated professional archaeological societies. Particularly relevant when considering

copious registries of pottery and artifacts. See Root (2004) for a discussion of traditional attitudes toward both female archaeologists and the wives of male archaeologists who worked with their husbands on their field projects. See Hardy (2010: 79–82) for a discussion of the ways in which the division of labor among male and female Cypriot archaeologists replicates larger social norms.

17. For female archaeologists working in the Middle East on European-based excavations, see Bolger 2008 and sources therein. For biographies of female archaeologists working in the Old World, see Cohen and Joukowsky, eds. 2006; for additional biographies, see http://www.brown.edu/Research/Breaking_Ground/introduction.php [accessed January 17, 2016]. For a history of female archaeologists in the early years of Near Eastern archaeology, see Adams 2007. For female archaeologists in Europe, see Díaz-Andreu and Sørensen 1998. For female archaeologists in the Americas, see, *inter alia*, Claassen 1994. The 2014 conference “Women in Archaeology” at the University of Pennsylvania queried the experiences of women working in archaeology, particularly in the Middle East (Nishimura 2014).

18. See <http://www.asor.org> [accessed January 17, 2016].

19. For a preliminary overview of this material, see Schlegel 2014. For ASOR’s female membership, see Cormier n.d.

20. For Israel, see Ebeling 2011b; http://www.antiquities.org.il/m_digs_eng.aspx?shana=2015 [accessed January 17, 2016]; for Cyprus, see Webb and Frankel 1995; Hardy 2010: 79–82, 86–87; see also Bolger 2008: 351–52; Prokopiou and Alphas 2014.

21. Webb and Frankel 1995.

22. For discussion, see Conkey and Spector 1984; Gero 1985; 1996; for archaeology as “inherently political, both in its practice and in the knowledge that it produces” see Hardy 2010: 31–32.

the Middle East and North Africa is the American Schools of Oriental Research, founded in 1900. It was not until the sixth decade of the 20th century that women were first selected to serve as ASOR trustees and officers, and ASOR did not select its first female president until 2013.²³ Fortunately, the climate in ASOR is changing. In 2014, 3 out of 4 officers and 9 out of 23 trustees are women.²⁴ Professional leadership, mentoring, and support for excavation directors and staff are essential for encouraging the participation of women both within ASOR and in fieldwork projects, and for facilitating their success when they do.

One means that ASOR has established to accomplish these goals is its "Initiative on the Status of Women," founded in 2011 to address a broad portfolio of professional issues. Through the initiative, scholars are engaged in projects designed to support women's work in Near Eastern archaeology.²⁵ One project that I have developed endeavors to make archaeological fieldwork safe from physical and emotional intimidation, harassment, and violence based on gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.²⁶

2.4. *Challenges That Are Typical throughout the Field of Near Eastern Studies: Who Engages in the Study of Women in Antiquity?*

Also important is the fact that it is most often women who undertake scholarship on women, whether the focus is on material culture, on texts, or on some combination of the two. This point is underscored by the roster of speakers at the 2014 conference at which this essay was first presented, "Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East," at the Centre of Excellence in "Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions," University of Helsinki.²⁷ The conference was organized by two women, Saana Svård and Agnès Garcia-Ventura. Each spoke in the conference, as did an additional 15 women and 3 men. One might look, as well, at contributors to books on gender in the ancient Near East. For example, of the 9 chapters in *The World of Women in the Ancient and Classical Near East*, 8 were written by women and one co-written by a woman and a man.²⁸ The articles collected in that book were drawn from a session that I organized for ASOR's annual meeting. (Originally called "The World of Women: Gender and Archaeology," it is now called, "Gender in the Ancient Near East.") Over the course of its first 16 years (2000–2015), women presented 66 papers and men presented 17. Additional examples abound.²⁹

23. Susan Ackerman, ASOR's first female president, an expert in the Hebrew Bible and other Near Eastern texts, has written extensively about women in the biblical world. For a history of women's participation in the premier professional society for biblical scholarship, the Society of Biblical Literature, see Curtis 2005. For the Classics professional society, the Archaeological Institute of America, see Allen 2002: 16–20.

24. For women in leadership positions in ASOR, see Nakhai 2012a; 2012b.

25. I chair the Initiative on the Status of Women; see <http://www.asor.org/committees/status-of-women.html> [accessed January 17, 2016].

26. For the dangers that fieldwork poses due to gender-based violence, harassment and intimidation, see Nakhai 2015a.

27. See <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/sacredtexts/2014/08/02/workshop-gender-methodology-and-the-ancient-near-east/> [accessed January 17, 2016].

28. Nakhai 2008.

29. For full-length monographs on women in Israel and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, see Robins 1993; Meyers 1998; 2013; Bahrani 2001; Marsman 2003; Ebeling 2010b.

2.5. *Challenges That Are Typical throughout the Field of Near Eastern Studies: Women and the Study of Women in Academia*

Female—or primarily female—scholars persist despite the fact that several factors impede the study of women in the ancient Near East. One is that (at least until recently) the study of women in any place and time has not been valued as an intellectual endeavor; as a consequence, research focusing on gender and women has not been rewarded by success within the academy or in the archaeological world.³⁰ The job market for scholars specializing in research on gender and women is weak, meaning that those who seek employment in the academy must specialize in something else and then research women “on the side.” This is a problem with multiple dimensions. There are no Near Eastern antiquities positions that specialize in the study of gender or of women. Departments of Near Eastern Studies, Anthropology, Classics, and so forth hire by region—say, Egypt, or Western Asia, or the Levant—or by period—say, prehistoric, or biblical, or Roman—or by specialization—say, technologies, or languages and literatures, or complex societies. At the same time, departments of Gender and Women’s Studies emphasize modernity rather than the study of the distant past.

For example, the University of Arizona, in Tucson, Arizona, is ranked among the leading public institutions of higher education in the United States.³¹ Its internationally renowned School of Anthropology is one of the most highly ranked in the United States. In 2014–15, of its 42 faculty members specializing in archaeology, only one listed women in antiquity as a primary interest.³² In the University’s Classics Department, only 3 among the 24 faculty members listed women in antiquity among their research interests; of those three (all women), two are retired.³³ The Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, one of the nation’s first (founded in 1975), has 73 faculty members; among them, two female faculty members indicated interests in the ancient Near East.³⁴

A cursory perusal of American colleges, universities, and seminaries that are home to individuals who direct excavations in Israel indicates that the situation is hardly different on other campuses. Faculty members in all the critical departments are predominantly, if not exclusively, men. Scant, if any, attention is paid to the reconstruction of women’s lives in ancient Near Eastern antiquity. This is the case whether the excavation director is a man or (much less commonly) a woman.³⁵

30. Gero 1985: 344.

31. This information is gleaned from the university’s 2014–15 academic year website (<http://www.arizona.edu> [accessed January 17, 2016]).

32. The number 42 includes core, affiliated, and adjunct members, 16 of whom are women (<http://anthropology.arizona.edu> [accessed January 17, 2016]). I am the sole faculty member (affiliated) who included women in antiquity as a primary research interest.

33. The number 24 includes core, emeritus, and associated faculty members (<http://classics.arizona.edu> [accessed January 17, 2016]).

34. The number 73 includes 13 core and more than 60 affiliated faculty members (<http://gws.arizona.edu> [accessed January 17, 2016]). The two affiliated faculty members who list women in antiquity as a research interest are one of the retired members of the Classics faculty and myself.

35. The 14 excavation projects included in this list are those affiliated with ASOR’s Committee on Archaeological Research and Policy that have active field projects in Israel (2015–16; <http://www.asor.org/excavations/cap.shtml> [accessed January 17, 2016]). The directors/co-directors represent 22 American colleges, universities and seminaries. The projects are: (1) Tel Kabri: U.S. co-director Eric Cline, George Washington University; (2) Khirbet Kana: director C. Thomas McCollough, Centre College;

What all this means is that scholars committed to the study of what has been called “gender archaeology and the archaeology of gender”³⁶ tend to be scholars who are vested in the endeavor, those with a deep passion for it, because for others the rewards are insufficient. Not by chance, these scholars are most often women. And for women, success in the academy remains challenging in ways not experienced by their male colleagues. By now, the literature on gross disparities between women and men in obtaining academic positions and receiving promotions to the highest ranks, on publishing articles and books, on being cited for their work, and on egregious salary inequities is vast. These problems have not been lost on the archaeological community.³⁷

2.6. *Challenges Typical to Reconstructing the Lives of Women in Iron Age Israel: The Hebrew Bible*

In addition to those challenges to the reconstruction of women's lives that are experienced by scholars working across the ancient Near East, there are challenges that are unique to scholars working with the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps most significant is the fact that the Hebrew Bible is exceptionally complex, containing materials in multiple literary genres that were written, compiled, and redacted over the course of close to a millennium. In addition, it is the work of—and retains the traditions of—people living within sociopolitical structures that ranged from clan to monarchy to exile to occupation—even as they lived in different countries (Israel, Judah, and Babylon). In the earliest material in the Hebrew Bible, which may date as far back as 1100 B.C.E. (e.g., Exod 15; Judg 4), Israel's Canaanite roots are reflected. In the latest, the book of Daniel, which attained its canonical form circa 165 B.C.E., one sees elements of the Hellenistic world.³⁸ Material from the latter part of the Iron II is comprised of royal court records and law codes, folk narratives and foundational tales, histories, etiologies, genealogies, territorial lists, prophetic sagas, psalms, proverbs, and more.³⁹ This represents, obviously, a huge range in chronology and geography and in the types of texts; in order to reconstruct the changing status, treatment, and voices of women, all these factors must be considered.

(3) Abel Beth Maacah: U.S. co-director Robert A. Mullins, Azusa Pacific University; (4) Shikhin: U.S. co-directors James R. Strange, Samford University; David Fiensy, Kentucky Christian University; (5) Tel Kedesh: U.S. co-directors Andrea M. Berlin, Boston University; Sharon Herbert, University of Michigan; (6) Lachish: U.S. co-directors Michael G. Hasel, Southern Adventist University; Martin G. Klingbeil, Southern Adventist University; (7) Galilee Prehistory Project: U.S. co-directors Morag Kersel, DePaul University; Yorke Rowan, Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago; (8) Jaffa: U.S. co-director Aaron A. Burke, University of California, Los Angeles; (9) Jezreel: U.S. co-director Jennie Ebeling, University of Evansville; (10) Lahav, Phase IV: U.S. director Oded Borowski, Emory University; (11) Ashkelon: U.S. co-directors Daniel L. Master; Lawrence E. Stager; (12) Omrit: U.S. co-directors Daniel Schowalter, Carthage College; Jennifer Gates-Foster, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Michael Nelson, Queens College; Benjamin Rubin, Williams College; Jason Schlude, St. John's University; (13) Tel Gezer: U.S. co-director Steven M. Ortiz, Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary; (14) Zeitah: Ron E. Tappy, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

36. Whitehouse 2007. See also, *inter alia*, Conkey and Spector 1984; Gero and Conkey 1991; du Cros and Smith 1993; Boyd 1997; Lesick 1997; Moore and Scott 1997; Gilchrist 1998; 1999; Sørensen 2000; Meyers 2003a; 2003b; Nelson 2004.

37. See, *inter alia*, Victor and Beaudry 1992; Nelson, Nelson, and Wylie. 1994; Hammel et al. 1995; Bolger 2008; Ebeling and Pace 2014.

38. Freedman 1997: 504.

39. See, *inter alia*, Freedman 1987; Friedman 1987; Schniedewind 2004: 191–213; Rollston 2010: 85–135; VanderKam 2012: 49–71.

Exacerbating the challenges created by the long chronological span over which the Hebrew Bible was composed is the fact that the dating of some of its major components remains, at least within certain circles, hotly debated. The ramifications for the reconstruction of women's lives are hardly inconsequential. The more difficult it is to state with authority the at-least-approximate date and setting from which a text derives, the more difficult it becomes to use that text as a descriptor of reality. For example, while most scholars date the major components of the Deuteronomistic History (books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings) to the latter part of the Iron Age II—that is, the era spanning the transition from when the people of Judah lived in their own land into the period of their exile in Babylonian⁴⁰—a small but vocal group dates it to the subsequent Persian period. Similarly, some archaeologists have down-dated Iron Age strata that might assist in reconstructing life throughout this period, creating a similar instability in the study of material culture.⁴¹

A quick example illustrates the consequent problems. There has been some discussion about the extent to which clan-based societies allowed women greater agency than did monarchies.⁴² The nation of Israel, of course, underwent the transition from clan-based (Iron I) to monarchical (Iron II), and recollections of each era and of the transition between them are recorded in the books of Judges through 1 Sam 7 on the one hand, and 1 Sam 8 through 2 Kgs 25 on the other. Each extended narrative, whether set in Israel's clan-based or monarchical era, contains stories about women that could be used to reconstruct women's lives and therefore, to test this scholarly hypothesis. However, these reconstructions are complicated both because the relevant stories are often crafted by embedding older material (whether oral or written) within later expansions and because the disagreements noted above regarding the dating of the texts affect precisely these passages.

2.7. *Challenges Typical to Reconstructing the Lives of Women in Iron Age Israel: Androcentrism and Elitism in the Hebrew Bible*

To complicate matters further, the Hebrew Bible is unapologetically androcentric and elitist. Even if it were possible to identify women as the authors of a few passages within it, this would do nothing to alter the Hebrew Bible's overwhelmingly male biases.⁴³ While these stem from a number of factors, it is significant that, throughout the ancient Near East, literacy was most often the domain of men. Enheduanna (23rd century B.C.E.), the daughter of Sargon of Akkad and *en*-priestess in Ur, who is touted as the region's first recorded poet, was a woman—but she was hardly typical within her own world, let alone across the population at large. Recent studies point to the presence of some female scribes in Mesopotamia (most often in the late third–early second millennia), to some educated women among the elite, to women who handled the accountancy for their households (see, for example, Prov 31), but evidence for female literacy in Iron Age Israel remains elusive.⁴⁴

40. See, *inter alia*, Friedman 1987; Halpern 1996.

41. For an overview of the dating issues, see Finkelstein and Mazar 2007. For additional overviews and for critiques of these theories as they relate both to biblical studies and to archaeology, see, *inter alia*, Dever 2001: 23–52; Grabbe 2007: 21–36.

42. See Steinberg 1991; Ackerman 2012.

43. For the idea that the Yahwistic (J) material in the Torah was written by a woman, see H. Bloom's commentary in Rosenberg and Bloom 1990.

44. For Enheduanna, see Bahrani 2001: 113–17; Lion 2015. For further discussion of Mesopotamian (Sumerian and Akkadian) women authors, see Halton and Svärd 2017. See also Pearce 1995: 2266;

How do the androcentric and elitist qualities of the various materials in the Hebrew Bible affect their utility for the reconstruction of women's lives? The book of Genesis, uniquely among biblical books, contains a number of stories in which women play a central role. For example, women entertain messengers from the Divine, and they receive and carry forth God's covenant and his blessing (Sarah [Gen 17:15–22, 18:1–15]; Hagar [Gen 16:1–16, 21:9–21]). The book of Exodus makes it clear that Moses, the hero of the saga of the exodus and the receiving of law, God's prophet *par excellence*, owes his life to a number of women (the midwives Shifrah and Puah, his sister Miriam, his mother Jochabed, the pharaoh's unnamed daughter and her female attendants [Exod 2:1–10], and the seven daughters of Reuel/Jethro, among them especially Moses' wife Zipporah [Exod 2:15–22, 4:24–26]). On the one hand, all these stories underscore women's agency within the domestic sphere; on the other hand, the actions of the women in these and other stories throughout the Hebrew Bible serve to advance the needs and the goals of Israel's male community. This is stunningly apparent in the Ten Commandments, the centerpiece of God's law for the people of Israel, which are explicitly directed to a male audience. Those about to receive God's law are cautioned to "not go near a woman" (Exod 19:15), despite the fact that no one would argue that women are exempt from the laws prohibiting murder, theft, adultery, and the like.⁴⁵

By the time the thrust of the biblical narrative moves to the Monarchy, women become, for the most part, peripheral to the text. Added to this androcentrism is the Hebrew Bible's elitism, as it focuses on priests and kings (all men), prophets (virtually all men),⁴⁶ heads of household and landowners (virtually all men), and military leaders (virtually all men). Of course, Israel and Judah also had a full complement of nonelite men—farmers, shepherds, potters, metal smiths, and the like—and the Hebrew Bible was not much concerned with them, either.

Adding to the problems encountered by the androcentric and elitist nature of the Hebrew Bible is the androcentric and elitist nature of the almost exclusively male biblical scholars and archaeologists of the 19th and 20th centuries. This is a problem (as already noted above) that hardly requires documentation.⁴⁷ From the early rabbis and church fathers to the 17th-century King James translators to the 19th- and 20th-century European and American biblical scholars and archaeologists, there was (until the latter part of the 20th century) hardly a woman in the mix. A number of them were clergy, steeped in faith-based traditions.⁴⁸ In the 20th century, the impact was most evident in the United States. Its resultant and uniquely American "biblical archaeology" continues to shape the framing of archaeological work that focuses on Iron Age Israel. While the debate on the "death" and "rebirth" of biblical archaeology continues,⁴⁹ an orientation toward "biblical" questions continues to constrain the investigation of women in ancient Israel.⁵⁰

Lion 2015. For the paucity of female scribes in Iron Age Israel and Judah, see Rollston 2010: 125–26.

45. Plaskow 1990: 25–31.

46. Ackerman 2002.

47. For the introduction of feminist and post-feminist scholarship into the study of the ancient Near East, see Asher-Greve 1997; 2001; Bahrani 2001: 7–27.

48. Elliott 1998; Davis 2004; Hallote 2006.

49. Dever 1993; 1998; 1999a; 1999b; 2003; Finkelstein and Mazar 2007; Levy 2010, and references therein.

50. For discussions of the ways in which this sort of scholarship has impeded the study of Israelite women's religious practices, see Ackerman 2003; Nakhai 2007b; for Iron Age female figurines, see

Also important is the fact that the composite text of the Hebrew Bible was crafted to express the relationship between Yahweh and his people, the Israelites, and not to serve as a work of sociological or historical significance. The biblical authors and editors had no commitment to accuracy as we value it today; rather, their goals were theological and polemical. What this means is that even when the Hebrew Bible contains texts that can be used for sociological or historical reconstruction, scholarly research that utilizes them for these reconstructions is extrinsic to these texts. It is, without any question, possible to extract narratives that reflect historical events relating to kings' reigns, warfare, the construction of major urban centers and some of their most significant architectural elements, and so forth. However, these narratives are commonly couched in the language of covenant between God and Israel. Examples include the story of the construction of the temple in Jerusalem by Solomon (1 Kgs 8:1–9:9),⁵¹ the stories of Sargon II's 721 B.C.E. destruction of Samaria (2 Kgs 17:1–6), and Nebuchadnezzar's 587 B.C.E. destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:1–12), each of which the Hebrew Bible relates not to the geopolitics of international imperialism but rather to Yahweh's desire to punish his people for their sins. While historical and sociocultural facts can be extracted from such material, these facts must be contextualized within the Hebrew Bible's theological framework.

2.8. *Challenges Typical to Reconstructing the Lives of Women in Iron Age Israel: Canon Both Sacred and Inspirational*

This is not, in every case, different from the many tendentious texts that originated elsewhere in the ancient Near East, but the fact that the Hebrew Bible is sacred canon for Jews and Christians and has functioned as such for nearly two millennia—as opposed to other Near Eastern texts, which came to light only in the past few centuries—means that the habit, as it were, of accepting its narratives at face value is deeply ingrained. Indeed, it was only with the European Enlightenment, commencing in the mid-17th century, that an ever-increasing number of scholars began to consider the Hebrew Bible the product of human hands rather than as Divine Writ.⁵² The Documentary Hypothesis,⁵³ subsequent modes of biblical analysis, and especially the introduction of archaeological data as correlates of biblical texts, have served to change this dynamic in the academic world radically.⁵⁴ Even so, the fact that the Hebrew Bible has been long-embedded within religious communities can complicate scholarly engagement with the Hebrew Bible as a viable witness to antiquity and as a valuable resource for reconstructing the lives of its least valued community, women.

A by-product of these issues is what might be termed “inspirational” literature, which purports to highlight powerful women in the Hebrew Bible and which

Nakhai 2014b: 165–69; for the ancient Near East, and especially for the so-called fertility goddesses, see Hackett 1989.

51. Finkelstein and Mazar 2007: 99–139.

52. Knight 1985; Friedman 1987: 15–32.

53. The Documentary Hypothesis, articulated in its classical formulation by J. Wellhausen (1885), credits the composition of the Torah/Pentateuch to four separate communities, the Yahwists, Elohist, Priests, and Deuteronomists. It attributes specific passages within the Hebrew Bible's first five books to each community.

54. The scholarly literature is too extensive to document. For recent overviews that incorporate resources on various of these approaches, see, *inter alia*, Knight and Tucker 1985; Perdue 2001; Matthews 2007; Gravett et al. 2008.

is offered as an antidote to the androcentrism and even misogyny of some biblical narratives and some biblical scholarship.⁵⁵ One of the first and best-known books in this genre is A. Diamant's *The Red Tent*, and there are, by now, many others.⁵⁶ This emergent body of literature, not infrequently authored by women with clerical or academic pedigrees, may combine multiple perspectives within biblical and contemporary critical studies.⁵⁷ It seeks to show that women filled important roles in Israelite—or at least biblical—society. An unintended consequence of this literature is the demand it creates for the upbeat, which is neither a goal of serious scholarship nor reflective of the true status of women in first millennium B.C.E. Israel and Judah; seen differently, it may be that the demand for the upbeat is what created the literary market in the first place. In contrast to this inspirational literature, several recent books by scholars well trained in archaeology and biblical studies present fictionalized narratives about Israelite women, which are well grounded in sociocultural and historical realities.⁵⁸

An unfortunate component of some of these “inspirational” reconstructions is their anti-Semitic trope, which is commonly based on the fallacious hypothesis that in the ancient Near East, a goddess reigned supreme until male deities—and most especially Yahweh, the god of the Israelites—killed her off. (For this grossly inaccurate reconstruction, some even think that Jews until today might be expected to shoulder the blame.)⁵⁹ A not-unrelated problem is found in the work of scholars who view the Old Testament as a precursor to the New. These scholars often portray the women in the Old as subjugated in comparison to their New Testament counterparts, women whom they understand to have been “liberated” through Jesus.⁶⁰

2.9. *Challenges Typical to Reconstructing the Lives of Women in Iron Age Israel: Ethnographies, Photographic and Textual Archives, and Iconographic Imagery*

A different methodological challenge for the reconstruction of women's lives in Iron Age Israel is presented by the use of ethnographic studies of “premodern”

55. Reinhartz 1998; Klein 2007.

56. Diamant 1997. See also, *inter alia*, Raver 1998; Hammer 2001; Mirkin 2004; Brenner 2005; Ribner 2012. *The Secret Chord: A Novel* treats King David but draws on his personal and family life, including the many women with whom he was involved (Brooks 2015).

57. For definitions and issues, see Asher-Greve 1997; Bahrani 2001: 7–27. Several entries in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies* (O'Brien 2014) explicate the kinds of interpretive stances that may be incorporated into biblical “biographies.” For further reading, see “Social Scientific Approaches” (including psychology and psychoanalysis, gender and cultural studies, and more; Stiebert 2014), “Feminism” (“First-Wave Feminism” [Setzer 2014], “Second-Wave Feminism” [Scholz 2014], and “Third-Wave Feminism” [Nelavala 2014]), “Womanist Criticism” (Bridgeman 2014), “Queer Readings” (Macwilliam 2014), and “Postcolonial Approaches” (Liew 2014).

58. Beach 2005 (and see Nakhai 2007a); Ebeling 2010b. Several other short fictional pieces, similarly by scholars well versed in archaeology and biblical studies, recreate daily life for Israelite families (King and Stager 2001: 9–19; van der Toorn 2003). There are, in addition, some books that utilize renowned biblical women to anchor scholarly inquiries (Schneider 2004; Bodi, ed. 2013; Meyers 2013). See Bellis 2007 for an overview of scholarly contributions.

59. For discussion, see Heschel 1992; von Kellenbach 1994 and references therein; Corley 2002, 2014; Nakhai 2014b: 167 n. 2.

60. For these various topics and discussions of them, see Collins 1979; Daly 1979; Fiorenza 1979; Reuther 1979; Stone 1979; Plaskow 1990: xv, 91; Gimbutas 1989; Frymer-Kensky 1992; von Kellenbach 1994 and references therein; Tringham and Conkey 1998; Corley 2002; 2014; Fredriksen and Reinhartz 2002; Levine et al. 2004; Talalay 2012; Rooke 2014.

societies as comparanda for biblical narratives and archaeological data. The resources are rich but their use in ways that are academically rigorous is complex. A major issue, of course, is the fact that the culture of today's predominantly Muslim Middle East is not the culture of Iron Age Israel. The passage of two and a half millennia and the introduction of Islam, a religion that did not exist for more than 1,000 years subsequent to the Iron Age, argue against the facile use of comparanda. The first European explorers and anthropologists, in pursuit of their biblical forebears, imagined that the peoples of the 19th–20th century Middle East were their modern-day counterparts; substantiation for this perspective was, at best, illusory.⁶¹ Complicating the problem is the fact that Middle Eastern women were rarely visible, let alone accessible, within the public world of men—that is, within the world to which foreigners, themselves men, had access. More recently, there have been some very well-designed ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological projects that focus on the lives of women.⁶²

There are also some tantalizing photographic archives from the 19th and 20th centuries.⁶³ However, they are vulnerable to the same problems as are ethnographic studies (some of which included photographs)⁶⁴—and they are vulnerable to other problems, as well. Their use is complicated by the fact that it is difficult to verify the truthfulness of the images, because neither photographers nor subjects are alive to comment on them. These old photographs were often staged, with women positioned in settings that were not part of their normal daily lives.⁶⁵ This might mean that women were posed alongside others (especially men) with whom they were not usually seen, or shown engaging in tasks known from biblical narratives but not a part of their everyday lives, or photographed using tools or installations best known from archaeological excavations. The misleading character of at least certain of these photographs, some of which can be found in old excavation reports, is only now being recognized.⁶⁶ This is not dissimilar to museum displays that purport to show the lives of ancient people. In her study of dioramas in museums in Israel and

61. See, *inter alia*, Robertson Smith 1894; Grant 1907; 1921; Heaton 1956. As Grant wrote in his preface to the second edition of *The People of Palestine*, “We have picked the village life as most suggestive of the quaint customs of the past. . . . Life has changed even in the East but much remained in Palestine, especially under the Turkish régime, that is suggestive of Bible times” (1921: 5).

62. Mandate-era Palestine (Granqvist 1931; 1947; 1950; 1959); Israel (Ginat 1982; Sered 1992); Iran (Kramer 1979; Friedl 1980; 1989); Iraq (Fernea 1965); Cyprus (London 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; Bolger 2010).

63. *Inter alia*, Palestine Exploration Fund: n.d.; G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection at the U.S. Library of Congress: n.d.; Harvard College Library: n.d.

64. See, *inter alia*, Grant 1907; 1921.

65. Posing and other modifications are also found in photographic archives that strive to document other parts of the world. One important example is the work of Edward Curtis (1868–1952), whose photographs depict not only the American West of the late-19th–20th centuries but also the Native Americans who lived there (http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/067_curt.html [accessed January 17, 2016]; and see Zamir 2014: 18–50). For discussions of how photographers use their subjects to project their own visions, see, *inter alia*, Scherer 1975; Blackman 1980; Kosminder 1998; Schendel 2002. My thanks to Jannelle Weakly, curator, Photographic Collection, Arizona State Museum, and Aleta Ringlero, co-curator of the ASM exhibit, *Curtis Reframed: The Arizona Portfolios* (<http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/exhibits/> [accessed January 17, 2016]), for their assistance.

66. Graham-Brown 1980; 1988; Amiry and Tamari 1989; Hallote 2006: 29–41; Ebeling 2010a; 2011a. For a discussion of how illustrations in archaeological handbooks and journals, which reconstruct scenes from antiquity, misrepresent women and gender roles, see Meyers 2007.

Jordan, J. Ebeling has shown that when women are represented, they are shown only in humble domestic roles.⁶⁷

There are several final points to consider. The first is the paucity of extrabiblical texts from the Iron Age and, in particular, extrabiblical texts that shed light on women's lives. Of those few archives written on ostraca, some, such as those from Samaria and Arad are economic; another, from Lachish, treats military matters.⁶⁸ A very few inscriptions, those from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qôm, refer to a goddess but that is as close to female as these texts get. Of course, most of Israel's literary corpus was written on papyrus or parchment and is thus long-since destroyed.⁶⁹ The second point relates to the absence of a robust iconographic record that would provide visual imagery for Iron Age women. The bas-reliefs from King Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh, which depict the conquest of the Judaeian city of Lachish in 701 B.C.E., include several women and children among the population of captives and deportees.⁷⁰ In contrast, female imagery on seals and in coroplastic art is most commonly understood to represent divinities rather than mortals.⁷¹

3. Concluding Remarks

What, then, does this overview offer with regard to the study of women's lives in ancient Israel? This question is perhaps best answered by considering some fruitful modes of inquiry for future research. First and foremost, a cohort of well-trained scholars who can work at the intersection between text and archaeology is needed. This means a commitment to the Hebrew Bible and other Near Eastern literatures, a mastery of archaeological fieldwork that facilitates engagement with site reports, technical data, and synthetic analyses, and training in anthropology, in order to utilize anthropological models and ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological data. This multidisciplinary skillset offers scholars the ability to raise new questions and propose new solutions. Related to this is the need to integrate research on women—and teaching about women—into all publications and course syllabi, as opposed to segregating and thereby marginalizing such work within separate, gendered “silos.” All this will not only improve the quality of contemporary scholarship but will also help to train a new generation of archaeologists and text scholars who are motivated to consider the lives of women in antiquity.

Archaeologists and other researchers must focus their work on those areas within settlements in which women were the most present, and therefore in which they will be, even today, the most evident. Here, the recent attention to household archaeology, to the study of families, and to household or family religion makes important contributions.⁷² To say that it is within the household setting that women in antiquity were most visible is not to diminish their accomplishments but rather

67. Ebeling 2011a.

68. For Samaria, see Sparks 2005: 453; for Arad, see Sparks 2005: 459–60; for Lachish, see Sparks 2005: 460–61. For the relative paucity of bullae and other sealings in Iron II Judah, see Faust 2014.

69. For Kuntillet 'Ajrud, see Sparks 2005: 450–52; for Khirbet el-Qôm, see Sparks 2005: 452.

70. Ussishkin 1982: fig. 70.

71. Keel and Uehlinger 1998; Nakhai 2014b: 183–85, fig. 12.

72. See, *inter alia*, Stager 1985; van der Toorn 1996; Purdue et al. 1997; Meyers 2005; Nakhai 2005; 2011; 2014a; 2015b; Ackerman 2008; Bodet and Olyan 2008; Hardin 2010; Yasur-Landau, Ebeling, and Mazow 2011; Albertz and Schmitt 2012; Dever 2012; Faust 2012; Albertz, Nakhai, Olyan, and Schmitt 2014.

to acknowledge reality and highlight the fact that in antiquity, most people's lives were centered on the sustenance of the domestic unit and were driven by the exigencies of Israel's subsistence economy.⁷³ This may seem obvious, but (as already indicated), in the past domestic life and household archaeology were not considered topics worthy of serious scholarship.⁷⁴

In contrast, the recent excavation project at Tell Abel Beth Maacah, Israel, led by Nava Panitz-Cohen of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Robert Mullins of Azusa Pacific University in California,⁷⁵ incorporates a deliberately constructed investigation into the lives of women.⁷⁶ Abel Beth Maacah's "Gender Agenda" utilizes micro-archaeological analyses of sediments and residues from domestic spaces, leading to a more complete understanding of work areas, diet, culinary practices, modes of economic production, and more, and revealing important information about women's daily lives.⁷⁷

That the Abel Beth Maacah Excavation is co-directed by a female archaeologist and a male archaeologist underscores another critical point: engaging men—and not only women—in research on women and society in ancient Israel and its environs. Given the preponderance of men in positions of authority, whether as excavation directors or within the academy in tenured positions and prestigious chairs, it is essential that men fully embrace the importance of this research, whether or not they themselves engage in it. In this way, those who have developed and legitimized this field, often at the expense of research that might have served them better in terms of professional advancement, can be recognized for their contributions—and their cumulative contributions can become the basis for ongoing investigations into the lives of women in Iron Age Israel. The Facebook page for ASOR's Initiative on the Status of Women provides a useful venue for all kinds of discussions.⁷⁸

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73. For a discussion of gender and household archaeology within the context of the archaeology of equality, see Osborne 2007. For a discussion of the dangers presented by interpreting the archaeological past, in relationship both to gender and to women's roles in society as "a logical precedent for the present," see Gero 1985: 343; see also Conkey and Spector 1984.

74. For example, in the three major books on daily life in ancient Israel, one from 1961 (de Vaux 1961) and the other two from the turn of the new millennium (King and Stager 2001; Borowski 2003), all of which were written by men, women were included, if at all, only in discussions of social status and social structure—that is, as wife, mother, widow, and so forth. Interestingly, two other books on daily life in antiquity, on Mesopotamia (Nemet-Nejat 1998) and on Egypt (Meskell 2002), written by women at about the same, incorporate women as well as men into all aspects of their studies of daily life.

75. See <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org> [accessed January 17, 2016].

76. See <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org/index.php/12-seasons/2013-season/78-gender-agenda> [accessed January 17, 2016].

77. For further discussion of gendered differences in fieldwork and in the archaeological interpretation of excavation materials, see Gero 1996.

78. See https://www.facebook.com/groups/1469401773364915/1519198168385275/?notif_t=like#_ [accessed January 17, 2016].

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