Saul, Benjamin, and the Emergence of Monarchy in Israel: Problems and Perspectives

Joachim J. Krause, Omer Sergi, and Kristin Weingart

The formation of the Israelite monarchy lies at the heart of ancient Israel studies from its early beginnings and involves historical, archaeological, and biblical studies. From a historical point of view, the formation of the Israelite monarchy should be seen in the context of the transitional period between the Late Bronze and the Iron Ages, a period that saw the formation of local territorial polities throughout the Levant. From an archaeological point of view, the debate relates to the archaeological research of the southern Levant in general and the central Canaanite hill country in particular, with a special emphasis on Jerusalem and its environs. Last but certainly not least, the issue requires the study of biblical traditions regarding the early monarchy that are embedded in the books of Samuel and Kings.

Recent historical and archaeological studies cast doubt on much of the historicity of the Saul and David traditions in Samuel–Kings, especially with regard to the reconstruction of a great united monarchy under the rule of David from Jerusalem. The main gap contemporaneous scholarship faces is between the biblical narrative—according to which the monarchy emerged first in Jerusalem and only later in Israel (Shechem, Tirzah, and Samaria)—and between historically and archaeologically based reconstructions, which tend to demonstrate the exact opposite: Israel and Judah developed separately, side by side during the Iron IIA, and it was Israel that grew up to be a territorial monarchy before Judah, which only flourished in its shadow.

Such a historical reconstruction calls for fresh exegetical approaches to the biblical traditions about Saul, David, and the early monarchy in Jerusalem. A most interesting focal point is the place of Benjamin within the biblical traditions about the early monarchy, for according to the bibli-

cal narrative this region, situated north of Jerusalem, was the home of the early Israelite monarchy under the reign of Saul (1 Sam 9–14). It is a matter of lasting dispute, however, whether Benjamin and Saul were affiliated with Israel or with Judah. Yet it is exactly this dispute that is embedded in the question of the early formation of the Israelite monarchy and that can bridge the gap between the biblical narrative and the archaeologically based historical reconstruction.

To this matter the following papers are devoted. As for archaeology, they present the most recent evidence pertaining to the emergence of state and regional power structures and propose historical reconstructions based on that evidence. Exegetically, the date, textual pragmatics, and historical value of biblical texts dealing with the emergence of monarchy in Israel and Judah and the allocation of the Benjaminite territory come under discussion. This integration of approaches allows for a nuanced and differentiated picture of one of the most crucial periods in the history of ancient Israel. Methodologically, it bridges a gap often felt between studies approaching the emergence of monarchy in Israel predominantly or exclusively from one of the two angles. Rather than attempting to harmonize archaeological data and biblical texts or to supplement each respective approach by integrating only a fitting portion of data stemming from the other, both perspectives come into their own. The result is a nuanced picture of diverging results as well as surprising overlaps.

All in all, the essays collected in this volume reflect on many aspects of the early Israelite monarchy: state formation, local and collective identities, southern Canaan in the Iron I–IIA, the composition and redaction of the literary traditions about Saul and David, and the historical value of these traditions. Eventually, though using different methods and highlighting different aspects of the subject at hand, they all aim to ponder the question of the united monarchy under Saul and David in light of current historical and archaeological discourse.

Commencing the discussion, Ido Koch details "On Philistines and the Early Israelite Kings: Memory and Perceptions." The Philistines are the leitmotif in the stories of the early monarchy. Their aggressive and foreign character plays a crucial role in the cohesion of the Israelites and the establishment of the monarchy, that is, the rise and fall of Saul and the rise of David. This literary image is at the heart of the common scholarly assumption that the struggle with the Philistines was a landmark in the creation of a highlander social identity. This assumption has been further expanded in recent archaeological discourse to explain the distribution

of various material remains as reflecting either the Philistine incursion or the highlander resistance. However, Koch questions both assumptions by tracing and dating the old memories of the Philistines in the stories of the early monarchy, especially those of Saul.

In "Saul and Highlands of Benjamin Update: The Role of Jerusalem," Israel Finkelstein revisits his hypothesis of a tenth-century BCE north Israelite territorial entity centered in the Benjamin plateau hinted at in pre-Deuteronomistic biblical material on the house of Saul. Following an archaeological reconstruction of the highland polities in the Iron IIA, he suggests that Saul's kingdom encompassed the entire central hill country between Jerusalem and Shechem. Finkelstein views this polity as the forerunner of the kingdom of Israel, where, based on the Saul memories, the concept of the united monarchy came into being in the days of Jeroboam II.

Picking up the thread, Omer Sergi's "Saul, David, and the Formation of the Israelite Monarchy: Revisiting the Historical and Literary Context of 1 Samuel 9–2 Samuel 5" contests one of the most accepted hypotheses in biblical scholarship, namely, that the biblical traditions about Saul originated in the kingdom of Israel and that they arrived in Judah only after the fall of Samaria (720 BCE) and stimulated the composition of the stories about David's rise, which are dated, accordingly, to the seventh century BCE. It is therefore assumed that the connection between David and Saul is only literary. Examining nuanced archaeological data from the central Canaanite hill country in the Iron IIA, Sergi argues for the formation of a polity that encompassed both Benjamin and Jerusalem as early as the tenth century BCE. On this basis he sets out to analyze the biblical traditions about Saul and David in 1 Sam 9–2 Sam 5, arguing that they should not be read as an allegory but rather as a story about the formation of the Israelite monarchy in Jerusalem. Bringing the kinship identity of Israel to the fore, he argues that in these stories *Israel* does not refer to the northern kingdom but rather to the kinship identity of the inhabitants of Benjamin and Jerusalem.

In this line, Wolfgang Oswald explores "Possible Historical Settings of the Saul-David Narrative." The Saul-David narrative (*1 Sam 9–2 Sam 8) deals with the legitimacy of the rule of King David and at the same time with the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty. The legitimacy of the Judahite dynasty is obviously contested by Benjaminite elites, and the purpose of the narrative is to defend it vis-à-vis these Benjaminites. While the point of dispute is kingship over Israel, the parties of the dispute are Benjamin and Judah. As is evident in 1 Chr 10, this dispute was an enduring issue

in the history of Judah. Oswald's assumption is that periods of change and uncertainty in the relation between Judah and Benjamin were the occasions in which the problem of the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty became virulent. He identifies and describes four such historical settings for the successive development, first of the Saul-David tradition, then the Saul-David narrative, and eventually the reworking of the narrative.

Joachim J. Krause focuses on the early phase of the kingdom of Judah in "The Land of Benjamin between the Emerging Kingdoms of Israel and Judah: A Historical Hypothesis on the Reign of Rehoboam." In the context of a rather controversial debate concerning the great united monarchy as depicted in the biblical accounts of David and Solomon, doubting the very existence of Solomon's son and successor Rehoboam currently is at one end of the spectrum; at the other end are mere paraphrases of the biblical record. Working toward a balanced picture between these polar positions, Krause seeks to put a piece of the puzzle dubbed "the trouble with Benjamin" in its proper place. To this end, in a first step the textual material on Rehoboam is reevaluated as to its varying degrees of value as a source. This discrimination allows Krause to correlate, in a second step, the external data available, namely, the Egyptian evidence for the campaign of Shoshenq I to Palestine. This campaign must have had considerable implications for the rival kingdoms' struggle for Benjamin, as was shown cogently in an analysis by Israel Finkelstein. Against Finkelstein, however, the combined interpretation of textual material, both from the Bible and the Karnak inscription, and archaeological data points to Rehoboam's reign as the historical context of this development. In light of these considerations, Krause sketches a historical hypothesis: given the vital necessity for small Judah to define and defend the border vis-à-vis its stronger neighbor to the north, especially in view of the vulnerable position of Jerusalem and taking into account that Judah's chances to succeed in an escalation of the latent conflict were rather scant, the intervention of a foreign power pursuing its own goals in the region could have opened a window of opportunity for Rehoboam in his struggle for Benjamin.

Turning to the Northern Kingdom in the same phase, Kristin Weingart writes on "Jeroboam and Benjamin: Pragmatics and Date of 1 Kings 11:26–40; 12:1–20." The biblical accounts in 1 Kgs 11:26–40 and 12:1–20 are, in all likelihood, not a historical portrayal of the foundation of the kingdom of Israel. But when and to what end were the kingdom's origins presented this way? Based on the reconstruction of a pre-Deuteronomistic base layer, Weingart focuses on the textual pragmatics and historical

settings of 1 Kgs 11–12. She is able to show that, not only was Jeroboam originally introduced in a favorable light, but the separation of the Israelite tribes from Judah was also presented as a justified and consequent step prompted by Rehoboam's pretension and bad governance. At the same time, the depiction of Jeroboam that models him as a second David reveals a high degree of veneration for David. The latter is in keeping with the manner in which the origins of the Northern Kingdom are described: not as a glorious founding myth but rather with a legitimatory and almost apologetic tone. The narrative profile, literary stratigraphy, and textual pragmatics of the texts point to a northern Israelite setting and a date before the end of the Northern Kingdom in 720 BCE. Insights into the pragmatics and literary history of the texts also shed light on the development of the peculiar addition within 1 Kgs 11:26–40 that implies that ten tribes for Jeroboam and one tribe for Rehoboam resemble twelve pieces of Ahijah's garment.

The last two essays deal with the question of the tribal identity of Israel, especially in regard to Benjamin. "Benjamin in Retrospective: Stages in the Creation of the Territory of the Benjamin Tribe," by Oded Lipschits, suggests that the biblical territory of the tribe of Benjamin is a late artificial aggregation of two distinct historical and geopolitical units that were never part of the same geopolitical region: Benjamin (= "the son of the south") was a small tribe around Bethel, the southern Ephraim hills and Jericho, connected to the northern hill country, whereas the Gibeon plateau was part of the agricultural hinterland of Jerusalem. The destruction of the kingdom of Israel was the point of departure for a new period in the hill country, when for the first time the small, hilly southern entity did not have a larger and stronger northern neighbor. It was only in the days of Josiah that Judah could conquer the area of Bethel and Jericho and extend its border up to this line. After the 586 BCE destruction of Jerusalem, the city was severed from its agricultural hinterland, and the Babylonians created the district of Mizpah to the north of Jerusalem. Greater Benjamin became a unified administrative region, with Jerusalem as a marginal component at its southern border. However, soon after, already in the early Persian period, when the returnees from Babylon renewed the status of Jerusalem, the counterpolemic claims against Benjamin and Mizpah and in favor of Jerusalem and Judah could be written, especially in texts dealing with the premonarchic period. Based on these observations, Lipschits analyzes the traditions about Saul and David and the role of Benjamin in the formation of the Jerusalemite monarchy. He concludes that the first

monarch of the kingdom of Jerusalem, who came from the agricultural hinterland to the north of the city, was killed and that his kingdom was taken by David, originally from the agricultural hinterland to the south of Jerusalem. David succeeded in conquering Jerusalem and uniting it with the Judahite territory in the southern Judean hills around Hebron. In the Jerusalemite historiography, Saul was connected with the non-Israelite city of Gibeon and pushed to the north. The late use of the label *Benjaminite* also had deceptive intentions: it was aimed at distancing Saul from Jerusalem, labeling him as *Israelite* and setting him apart from the *Judahite* house of David.

Concluding the volume, in "The Israelite Tribal System: Literary Fiction or Social Reality?," Erhard Blum examines the antiquity of the Israelite tribal system in view of current hypotheses that propose to understand it as a late literary construction. He refers to fundamental insights of social anthropology and discusses the epigraphic attestation of kinship-based social entities, which are also mentioned in the biblical texts: Manassite clans referred to in the Samaria ostraca and the tribe of Gad mentioned in the Mesha Stela. In the light of this evidence, a late invention of the tribal system after 587 or 720 BCE proves untenable from a historical point of view. Israel's kinship identity is rather to be understood as an old and important factor in the social reality of ancient Israelites. In addition, the roles of Benjamin and Judah in the tribal system have interesting implications for the understanding and the much-debated issue of the existence of a united kingdom of David.

In sum, by presenting different approaches regarding the role of Saul and Benjamin in the foundation of the Israelite monarchy, the present volume aims to contribute to a more nuanced discussion of these matters and to shed some new light on the early Israelite monarchy in history and historiography.