



**Christian Frevel**

***Geschichte Israels***

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Daniel Buller

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Prof. Dr. Christian Frevel holds the Chair of Old Testament Studies at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany, and is Professor Extraordinarius for the Department of Old Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. First published in 2016, Frevel's *Geschichte Israels* is now published in a second, revised and expanded version. As the preface tells us, the present book is the result of the “Grundriss der Geschichte Israels” (Outline of the History of Israel) that was originally part of the German *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, coauthored by Frevel with Erich Zenger and others.<sup>1</sup> However, since the field of the history of Israel was growing too complex to write a “Grundriss der Geschichte Israels” in only one chapter, beginning with the ninth edition of the *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* the “Grundriss” was separated from the rest of the material and published as an individual book in 2016. Since the field of research is in constant flux, Frevel used the second edition of his *Geschichte Israels* to make revisions and update the sources.

Frevel's work is a welcome contribution to the field of research in which he discusses all the relevant aspects of the history of Israel. As Frevel explains in the first chapter, the study of the history of Israel deals with three levels: the biblical, the archaeological, and the historical; all three must be correlated to each other. This means that writing a history of Israel does not concern itself with simply retelling the biblical narratives, but the biblical narratives need to be evaluated in the

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1. Erich Zenger et al., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 9th ed., Kohlhammer Studienbücher Theologie (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016).

light of archaeology and history. Thus, writing a history of Israel means construction and interpretation so that a history of Israel can be reconstructed.

From cover to cover this book distinguishes itself by its didactic and problem-oriented approach. In every chapter Frevel presents the different scholarly positions in a well-balanced way, then evaluates them critically. When things are problematic, Frevel addresses these issues and avoids definite conclusions when none is possible. The wide range of problems discussed and the amount of current literature listed at the beginning of each section makes this work an important textbook for every student and scholar interested in the history of Israel. Furthermore, sixty illustrations of seals, coins, inscriptions, ostraca, figurines, and more, as well as nineteen maps from all the relevant time periods, provide the reader with a good view into the actual topics of discussion from archaeology and history. In addition, the appendix includes chronological overviews, a glossary, and other important information concerning the subject. Following Frevel's preliminary remarks in the first chapter, he presents in the next seven chapters his reconstruction from the early times of ancient Israel in the Late Bronze Age up to the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–135 CE). The following summary attempts to highlight Frevel's most important arguments.

Chapters 2 (39–66) and 3 (67–96) cover the prehistory and the early history of Israel, respectively. Frevel chooses the term *prehistory* because the earliest time that we can speak of an Israelite state in the usual sense can only be envisioned in the tenth or, even more likely, in the ninth century BCE. In both chapters Frevel's major argument concerning the origin of Israel is that Israel came into existence during a longer process *within* the land of Canaan, not outside of it (in Egypt, in the desert, etc.). The archaeological changes associated with the second millennium BCE, which have been interpreted in the context of the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, are not the result of migration movements (*Wanderungsbewegungen*) but rather point to alterations of settlement forms going back to socioeconomic changes between urban and rural lifestyle. In addition, Frevel sees no archaeological evidence for an exodus of a larger ethnic group that could be identified with the people of Israel leaving Egypt nor any signs of such a group entering the land of Canaan (not to speak of *violently* taking possession of it). Instead, as the latest research has shown, the people Israel is no different from its neighbors in that its origin is the result of an indigenous development *within* Canaan.

The fourth chapter (97–200) treats the emergence of the Israelite monarchy. One of the central points in the discussion has to do with archaeological findings of administrative structures. Where and from what time period do we find evidence for administrative structures, and when do they point us to the existence of an organized state of Israel in Palestine? When one considers also the criterion of literacy, so Frevel argues, we are pointed toward the tenth and ninth century BCE. However, he also explains that, when discussing the development from “no state to state,” one should be careful not to fall too quickly into binary positions. The development was surely a progress over a longer period during which substate structures grew and lasted until the Omride

dynasty at the beginning of the ninth century BCE. This phase of substate development (*substaatlichen Formationsphase*) distinguishes itself by the existence and the formation of so-called chiefdoms (*Häuptlingstümer*). Even the biblical description of the kingdoms of Saul, David, and Solomon show such traits. Thus, Frevel concludes that the biblical portrayal of transregional, famed kingdoms of David and Solomon is not in line with the archaeological findings of the given time period. So far, no archaeological evidence has been found that would confirm any of the building projects done by David and Solomon, nor does the archaeological evidence prove the transregional expanse of their kingdoms. Thus, Frevel argues that, while the absence of archaeological evidence is no clear proof against the biblical portrayal of Saul, David, and Solomon and we can surely assume that they existed, their kingdoms can be best described as chiefdoms that had power over a limited and rather regional territory.

The fifth, and longest, chapter (201–327) presents and discusses the phase from the beginning of the northern state of Israel to the fall of Judah. As far as the emergence of northern Israel is concerned, Frevel explains that no archaeological evidence has been found proving the existence of this state before the tenth century BCE. While Frevel leaves open whether the biblical portrayal of Omri is historically correct, he points out that Omri is the first king of the northern kingdom whose name appears in extrabiblical sources (Mesha Stela, the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, and the designation of Israel as “the land of Omri” in the Assyrian inscriptions and annals). From this he infers that the northern state of Israel emerged under the reign of Omri. The biblical portrayal, on the other hand, seems uninterested in Omri’s actual successes; rather, it probably stands in connection with the negative theological evaluation of the northern kings found in the Judahite writings of the Deuteronomistic History.

One of Frevel’s most important theses for his reconstruction of the development of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah again has to do with archaeological evidence for administrative structures. Frevel thinks that the evidence points to the supremacy of the northern kingdom (*Suprematie des Nordens*) over against Judah in terms of its administrative and economic development. Therefore, he argues that, for approximately the first two hundred years of the existence of the northern state, Israel dominated the area of southern Judah. Reasons for this include the fact that a number of the names of the first kings of Israel and Judah are identical and reveal chronological issues. Independent from the different solutions that have been proposed for these problems, Frevel interprets the event of Athaliah (Omri’s granddaughter) marrying the Judahite king Joram (2 Kgs 8:23–26; 11) as evidence for the political influence of northern Israel over Judah. Thus, because of the difference of the archaeological development between the north and the south, Frevel reckons with a longer period in which Israel was dominant over Judah. In fact, the latter reached full administrative and political independence not earlier than in the seventh century BCE.

The decisive consequence of Frevel’s reconstruction concerns the biblical portrayal of the division of the kingdom under Solomon’s son Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12). While Frevel argues that the notion

of the division of the kingdom is not historical, he thinks that it was not invented during the Hellenistic period, as some believe, but rather was de facto reached during the time of the northern supremacy and influence over the south beginning with King Omri.

The sixth chapter (328–68) covers the history of Israel during the Persian period. From the biblical perspective, this concerns the restoration portrayed in Ezra and Nehemiah. Frevel presumes that the northern supremacy that he sees in the early stages of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah carried on in the postexilic period. This leads to the assumption that, at the time of its restoration, the province of Jehud was of no great importance in the great Persian Empire. Thus, it should not be overestimated in terms of its political significance. Based on the uncertainty of the expansion of the province of Yehud and the demographic changes around Jerusalem at this time, Frevel assumes a return of a rather smaller group. While the so-called Cyrus Cylinder confirms the return of temple vessels and Judean exiles, Frevel holds that the number of returnees was much smaller than given in the biblical description. For him, the notion of “the entire land” going into exile (2 Kgs 25:21) is, from a historical perspective, as much questionable as the return of a larger group, as portrayed in Ezra and Nehemiah. Instead, he argues that the biblical data on the extent of the deportation and return at most demonstrate the meaning of the exile for the collective identity of postexilic Israel.

The last two chapters (369–405, 406–18) conclude Frevel’s reconstruction with the Hellenistic period and the Roman period. Most important for chapter 7, Frevel explains the province of Yehud being torn between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms due to the conflicts and influence of both. This led to the Maccabean revolt and continued through the period of political independence enjoyed in the Hasmonean kingdom until the Roman period, which is addressed in chapter 8.

As can be seen in the summary above, much of Frevel’s reconstruction challenges the biblical portrayal, and one may agree or disagree with the author’s description of the history of Israel. Be that as it may, the extensiveness of the discussion and the number of sources and problems presented make this book an invaluable textbook for this vast field of research. In contrast to other works, Frevel’s book includes the Hellenistic and the Roman periods in the history of Israel. Other works either present a sharp close at the end of the Persian period around 333 BCE or treat the Hellenistic period rather briefly but not extensively enough to understand the developments that took place during this time. With these last two chapters Frevel fills an all-too-common gap in the study of the history of Israel.

An English translation for a wider readership would be a valuable next step in the publication history of Frevel’s *Geschichte Israels*.