

## The Israelites and the Sea

Ecology, World Views and Coastal Settlements

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After discussing the ecologically problematic nature of the Sharon plain, Denis Baly (1957) concluded:

“This question of the marshlands of Sharon has been dealt with some length because they are the explanation for the extraordinary fact that though this was *the only section of the coast which the Israelites effectively possessed, they never colonized it*” (Baly, 1957, 135; emphasis added).

Indeed, Baly, who based his conclusions on an analysis of the texts (which hardly refer to this region; below), pointed to an interesting problem that was rarely touched upon by biblical scholars or archaeologists: the almost vacuum in settlement along a large part of Israel’s coast during most of the Iron Age II, i. e., the period of the Monarchy.

### **The Problem: Settlement in the Sharon in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Background**

The Iron Age II (c. 1000–586 BCE) was a period of growth in ancient Israel. Demographically speaking, the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE had witnessed a population peak that was never reached before, and will be overcome only many centuries later (e. g., Broshi/Finkelstein, 1991). The 8<sup>th</sup> century seems to represent a climax not only from a demographic perspective. Maritime trade seems to have

reached a new peak during this time (and even increasing later), and Phoenicians (and Greek) ships were sailing across the Mediterranean, and even beyond (e. g., Aubet, 1987; Markoe, 2003). Much of this maritime activity originated from Phoenicia, located on the shores of modern Lebanon, Syria and northern Israel. This trade was carried out along the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean, and evidence of this trade is found throughout the region (e. g., Ballard et al., 2002; see also Schreiber, 2003; Faust/Weiss, 2005, and references). The kingdom of Israel, on whose coast this paper concentrates, was, during part of this long period, a dominant state in the Levant (Finkelstein, 1999; cf. its position in the battle of Karkar as can be seen in Kuhrt, 1995, 466), and seems to have had close relations with the Phoenicians. Intuitively, the combination of a demographic peak throughout the country, along with the intensive maritime activity and Israel's relations with Phoenicia, is expected to have resulted with dense settlements along the coast during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This, however, is not the case. Settlement along the Kingdom of Israel's coast (the Sharon and the Carmel's coast) was significantly reduced during the Iron Age IIB; with a few exceptions the region was practically empty.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Journey Along the Coast: Presenting the Problem**

A bird-view look on the shores of the kingdoms of Philistia, Israel and Southern Phoenicia during the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE will present the viewer with a very surprising picture.<sup>2</sup>

Starting from the south, our trip will start at Ashkelon – probably a thriving port city on the southern coastal plain at the time (Stager, 1993). Some 15 km northward was the fortified settlement of Ashdod-Yam (Ashdod by the sea) (Kaplan, 1993a), accompanied (5 km inland) by the city of (in-land) Ashdod (Dothan, 1993b). Continuing our journey, we could see the settlement of Tel Mor (Dothan, 1993c; but see Barako, 2007, 246), the fortified settlement of Yavneh Yam (Fisher, 2002, 3), the city of Jaffa (Kaplan, 1993b) and slightly northward, also the fortress at Tell Kudadi, on the Yarkon outlet (Fantalkin/Tal, 2009). Despite the intensive sand dunes which covered the region, the area from Ashkelon to the Yarkon – some 50–55 km – was quite settled with fortified settlements and urban centers.

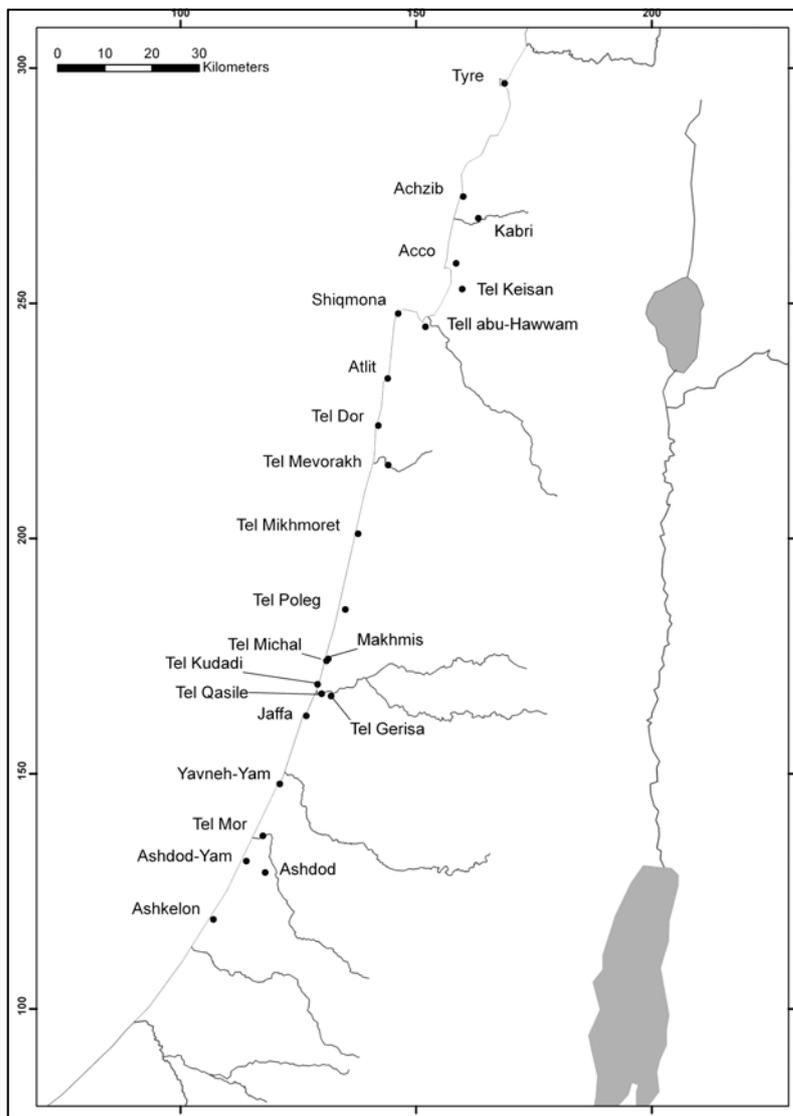
From the Yarkon river and northward, however, when traveling along the Sharon region, we will see mostly ruined and abandoned sites, some of which flourished only some 150–200 year ago. These deserted sites would include Tel Qasile (Mazar, 1993) and Tel Gerisa (Herzog, 1993a) on the Yarkon river (2.5

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, there was intensive settlement in this region during the Iron Age IIA (mainly the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE), but this was probably a result of stately initiative (Faust, 2007). In tandem with much larger demographic peak of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the settlement in the Sharon practically disappeared.

<sup>2</sup> The following description refers to sites situated along the coast, or in close proximity to it. The dearth of settlement in the Sharon, however, is evident also in its inner part.

and 4 km inland, respectively), Makhmis (Avigad, 1993) and Tel Michal slightly to the north (the latter might have had some human activity – but not a city of any type – at the time; Herzog, 1993b). Some sort of activity might have had taken place at Tel Mikhmoret (again at a very small scale at best) (Porat/ Palley/Stieglitz, 1993). Tel Poleg (Gophna, 1993) and Tel Mevorakh (Stern, 1993b), not far from the coast, were also laid in desolation for almost 200 years.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Ancient ruins can be witnessed all along the journey, but these of the Sharon are much more recent in comparison.

Only once we have reached Tel Dor, almost 60 km north of the Yarkon, will we be able to see again a large site and a thriving settlement along the coast (Stern, 1993a). Farther north, just below the Carmel we could visit Atlit (Haggi/Artzi, 2007) and Tel Shiqmona (Elgavish, 1994), and once we have crossed the Carmel, large and thriving sites are becoming dense: Tell abu-Hawwam (Ballensi/Herrera/Artzi, 1993, 10), Acco (Dothan, 1993a), Achziv (Prausnitz, 1993), and finally Tyre (Ward, 1997; Bikai, 1978). A little bit inland we could see settlements at Tel Keisan (Humber, 1993, 866) and Kabri (Oren, 2002, 70–72; Lehman, 2002) – all the latter, north of the Carmel, probably forming the southernmost part of Phoenicia.

### Focusing the Problem

The Sharon, the kingdom of Israel's main outlet to the sea, was almost devoid of significant human activity during a period of intensive maritime activity in the Mediterranean, and despite extensive settlement in other regions of the kingdom of Israel and of the demographic and economic prosperity which characterized the era. It is true that the Sharon is a delicate and problematic ecological niche, as pointed out by Baly (1957; see also Karmon, 1959; Faust/Ashkenazy, 2007; 2009). The area is flat, and is intersected by *kurkar* ridges, which block the stream on their way to the sea. Furthermore, the bottom of some of the intermediate valleys (between the *kurkar* ridges) are lower than the water-table. The area therefore suffers from severe drainage problems, and much of it was swampy. While much of the above is relevant regarding the entire coastal plain, the situation in the Sharon was much more problematic, and the problems more severe. While these problems no doubt could influence human settlement along the coast in general, and in the Sharon in particular, it is clear that a deterministic explanation is insufficient. Ecology cannot be the (sole) explanation for the lack of settlement in the Sharon during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. One must remember that the Sharon was settled, sometimes densely so, in other periods (e. g., Gophna/Beck, 1981; Faust, 2007). The Sharon was densely settled in the Early Bronze Age I (practically dozens of sites were identified; e. g., Yannai, 2002; Gophna, 1990), and then in the Middle Bronze Age II (Tel Gerisa, Tel Michal, Tel Aphek, Tel Poleg and Tel Mevorakh;<sup>4</sup> there were also many rural settlement in the region, see Gophna/Beck, 1981) and the Late Bronze Age (e. g., Tel Gerisa, Tel Michal [partially], Tel Aphek, Tel Mikhmoret and Tel Mevorakh). Furthermore, even the Iron Age I (e. g., Tel Gerisa, Tel Aphek and Tel Qasile) had witnessed settlement in the region, and the Iron Age IIA experienced surge of settlement (Tel Qasile, Tel Gerisa, Tel Michal Makhmis, Tel Aphek, Tel Mikhmoret, Tel Poleg and Tel Mevorakh) (for a more detailed history of settlement in the Sharon see Faust, 2007). Settlement in the Sharon prospered again in the Persian Period (e. g., Tel Qasile, Tel Michal, Makhmis, Appolonia, Tel Mikhmoret, Tel Poleg, Tel Mevorach and others; see also Tal, 2000; Shalev,

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<sup>4</sup> Note that not all the sites existed throughout the MB.

2009). Clearly ecology alone cannot explain the pattern. Of special importance is the fact that the very same area had a settlement boom in the Iron Age IIA (100–200 year earlier). The very same ecological niche of the Sharon hosted all these sites, and we do not possess any data that indicates environmental change in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and a severe deterioration of livelihood conditions at the time.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the Sharon was practically the only region in which the Kingdom of Israel – one of the most important states of the Levant – could have participated in the flourishing maritime trade. Special efforts were therefore expected to be conducted by the kingdom of Israel in an effort to settle this region (similar to the efforts done in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE; Faust, 2007). While there is no doubt that the above-mentioned ecological consideration was part of the cause for the limited settlement in this region, they cannot be the only factor responsible. We are therefore left with the question why were the western parts of the Sharon almost devoid of large scale human activity during the Iron Age IIB.<sup>6</sup>

### **Toward an Explanation: The Israelites and Sea**

Since ecology cannot explain the observed pattern, we should look for additional lines of evidence. In the present case, we believe there is clear evidence that at least part of the explanation lies in the realm of culture. On the basis of various lines of evidence, we would like to suggest that the desolation of the Sharon coastal region resulted also from cultural attitudes, and in the following I would attempt to show that the Israelites had a negative view of the sea and its inhabitants, and that most Israelites preferred to live away from this region. I will start by showing that this indeed was the pattern (culturally), and will later try to explain it.

#### **The Sharon in the Bible**

The Bible is a problematic source for studying Iron Age history. After all, in its final form it was written long after the events it describes, and following a long and complex process of editing (e. g., Friedman, 1987; Rofe, 1994; Eissfeldt, 1966). Due to its theological nature and the biases inherent in it (like most historical documents), it is very difficult to reconstruct the history of Israel and Judah on its basis alone. For cultural purposes, however, the Bible is an excellent source (e. g., King/Stager, 2001, 7; see also Dark, 1995, 57). As a written source which was intended toward an audience, it gives us a unique opportunity to learn about peoples' views, priorities and beliefs (not necessarily religious beliefs), not so much by studying the main narratives, but by observing the lan-

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, settlement in other parts of the coastal plain does not seem to exhibit the same decline after the Iron Age IIA, as would have been expected from an environmental change, and hence such an explanation should be ruled out.

<sup>6</sup> It seems as if human activity was resumed gradually from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and mainly during the Persian period (e. g., Stern, 2001, 68; Faust/Weiss, 2005).

guage and meanings of the various words and terms which form the background of the stories – not their intended message. For learning on Israelite perception of the Sharon, therefore, the Bible is an extremely suitable channel.

We will divide the discussion of the biblical data into two parts. (1) The importance of the region as can be viewed by the weight given to it in the Bible; (2) The way it was perceived by the Israelites according to the data we possess; what did the region symbolize for them. It is true that not all such questions can be replied by using the Bible as a cultural document but, luckily, the discussed questions seem to be answered by the texts.

**1) The importance of the region for the Israelites:** Just like other parts of the coastal plain the Sharon does not possess an important place in the Bible: According to Baly (1957, 135)

“the Old Testament mentions only two towns in the Sharon north of the Yarkon, and each of these towns only once, as part of a list, and not because anything of importance took place at either of them [...] Moreover, neither of these towns is really in the Sharon at all, but at the foot of the hills of Samaria”.

Baly refers to Socho (I King 4:10) above the alluvial valley near to Tul Karem and to the Gilgal (mentioned in the massoretic text of Joshua 12:23) which he identified with Jaljulya, also on the Alluvial valley (note that this is most likely an error, as most scholars follow the LXX on this matter; see e. g., Aharoni, 1979, 223; Rainey/Notley, 2006, 129).

The *area* of the Sharon is mentioned twice in sources that refer to Solomon's time (though only once in its name):<sup>7</sup> I Chronicles 5:16 mentioned that “over the herds that pastured in Sharon was Shitrai the Sharonite”. Notably, the usage of the area for herding hints at its relative peripheral position. The second source (I Kings 4:10), already mentioned, stated that the headquarter of Ben Heseb who was over the plains and all the land of Hephher, was at Socho, just below the western hills of Samaria (i. e., on the easternmost part of the Sharon; see Aharoni, 1979, 308, 313; Rainey/Notley, 2006, 175–176).<sup>8</sup>

The Sharon is not mentioned in any of the historical narratives pertaining to the time of the divided monarchy. The sources simply ignore this region, despite its being Israel's main outlet to the sea (above), and although there are more texts which refer to this period than to the earlier epoch.

The above, regardless of their date of composition, seems to exemplify the Sharon's (un)importance in the eyes of the biblical writers and editors, probably

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<sup>7</sup> It is also hinted in the story of building the Temple, where the cedars from Lebanon were brought by sea to the sea of Jaffa, and from there were carried overland to Jerusalem. At any event, this refers to the situation in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, cf. Faust, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Notably, some scholars divide the districts in a different way (e. g., Zertal, 1984; Stager, 2003), but the exact division is irrelevant for our purposes.

reflecting its emptiness as already established archaeologically.

2) The other mentioning of the Sharon in the Bible – not in historical narratives – seems to be even more revealing: There are 6 additional references to the Sharon by name (in addition to I Chronicles 27:29, see also Joshua 12:18; I Chronicles 5:16; The Song of Songs 2:1; Isaiah 33:9; 35:2; 65:10). One of the sources (I Chronicles 5:16) refers to an area in Transjordan,<sup>9</sup> and another (Joshua 12:18) does not provide much information. The other mentioning, however, are more revealing.

The Sharon is mentioned as something “rich” (e. g., Isaiah 33:9; 35:2),<sup>10</sup> but Baly believes that it is too rich (1957, 137): “[T]he result is likely to be overwhelming rather than comfortable”. Furthermore, Baly notes (1957, 136) that the phrase “a rose of the Sharon” (Song of Songs 2:1–3), indicates “not so much beauty [...] as something lovely amid much that is ugly [...] The picture here is of a delicate flower in the midst of a rather terrifying jungle [...]”. This is even clearer in Isaiah 65:10. Here “Sharon is paralleled with the Valley of Trouble (Achor) as two typically inhospitable places” (Baly, 1957, 137). Weeks (1992, 1161), summarized,

“[I]n the OT, the Sharon is a metaphor both for splendor and desolation [...]’. And Baly, in a similar vein, wrote that the Sharon ‘undoubtedly suggest something rich and desirable [...], but too rich. [...] (it) was covered with an impenetrable oak forest, and the ancient Israelites seems to have thought of Sharon as something extraordinary, rather exotic and outside their normal experience’”.

This clearly exemplifies the region’s place in the Israelite consciousness. First of all, it was not important – nothing of interest had happened there and it is not mentioned in any important event (real or fictitious) during the time of the divided monarchy. Furthermore, the name itself brought “bad” connotations. When thinking of the Sharon, one is thinking on a remote and forgotten area, and of desolation, emptiness, etc. Before elaborating on the possible reasons for the Sharon’s emptiness, I would like to expand the discussion, and to show that this view of the Sharon was part of larger cosmological system.

### **The (Physical) Sea in the Bible**

Although most Israelites lived not very far from the Mediterranean, the sea does not seem to have been of any importance in the Bible. According to King and Stager (2001, 179) “the Bible seldom refers to ships and sailing, since the Israelites, despite their proximity to the Mediterranean Sea, were not maritime peo-

<sup>9</sup> Note that Singer (1993) doubt whether all the references relate to the Coastal Plain. If he is right, than the marginality of the area for the biblical editors and audience becomes even clearer.

<sup>10</sup> See also Blenkinsopp, 2000, 440, 456–457.

ple but an agrarian kingdom". According to Follis (1992, 1058) "with but few exceptions, during the reigns of Solomon and Jehoshaphat, the Hebrews were not navigators of the Mediterranean". Moreover, even in these instances when the kingdoms of Israel and/or Judah were involved in maritime activities, according to the Bible, they did it with the help of the Phoenicians,<sup>11</sup> with whom they seems to have been on good terms. We do not need to go into a detailed discussion on the reliability of the biblical sources. If they were not accurate on this matter, we would have expected them to say that the maritime activity was done by the Israelites alone. Since they do ascribe it to the Phoenician one must conclude that either they are historical, in which case we could use them to show that the Israelites were not experts in naval activity, and needed the Phoenicians. Or, if we believe that the narratives are a-historical and fictional, then it means that sea was so unimportant for the Israelites, that they didn't even bother to claim mastery over it – even when inventing stories.

All the above seems to indicate that the Israelites were not interested in the sea, and were not very familiar with the coastal plain, including the Sharon. It shows that they regarded it as an "exotic", and an inhospitable place (only sources pertaining to describe the glorious days of the united monarchy seems to have claim interest in this region; Faust, 2007).

### **The (Cosmological) "Sea" in the Bible**

The word "sea" (*yam*) in the Bible is usually referring to a large body of water (Follis 1992, 1058). This word, however, also carries a symbolic, and negative, meaning (Lewis, 1993, 335; see also Stolz, 1995, 1397–1398). According to Follis (1992, 1058) "as part of the creation, the sea was under the control of Yahweh; but it was also a consistent threat". The Israelites had an ambivalent view of the sea. While acknowledging its fullness, regularity and expansive nature, they also spoke of its depth and entangling vegetation as entrapment. It "had a dangerous power, so much greater than that of mankind that the Hebrews sometimes used marine imagery to speak of their enemies' attacks which they felt helpless to withstand without divine intervention" (Follis, 1992, 1058–1059).

This can even be seen within Israel's wider cosmology. Generally speaking, the Israelites regarded the east as a hospitable orientation and as the direction of God. The west, also called *yam* ("sea"), was regarded as the place of chaos. This contrast, and the double meaning of the word sea (*yam*; meaning also "west"), can also be seen in the Exodus story. The contrast between good (east) and bad (*yam*; i. e., "west" and "sea") is exemplified in the *song of the sea* (Exodus 15;

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<sup>11</sup> For Solomon, see 1 Kings 9:26–28; 10:22. Regarding Jehoshaphat the Phoenicians are not mentioned, but note that the Bible treat it as a failed attempt, and no more (I Kings 22:49; II Chronicles 20:35–37; note that a Phoenician connection might be hidden in the fact that Jehoshaphat, who was a king of Judah, is mentioned to have attempted this maritime venture in some connection with Israel, which was Judah's mid-dlemen with Phoenicia).

and also Exodus 14), where God forces the sea to withdraw in order to allow the Israelites through. God is using the eastern wind, or the Godly wind, to force the sea (*yam*) to do his will (it is interesting to note that there is a Canaanite myth about a battle between Baal and Yam, and another myth about the battle between Baal and Mot, but the subject is beyond the scope of the present article; see, e.g., Grobaek, 1985, and additional bibliography; the negative attitudes towards the sea might be shared by many societies; see also Nash, 1997). In any case, it is clear that the attitudes reflected in the Bible, and in Biblical Hebrew, toward the sea are very negative (see also Faust, 2001). Clearly, the sea wasn't a place an Israelite wanted to live near to.

### **Trade**

Not only the sea, however, had a bad connotation. It appears as if, at times at least, the Israelites had also a negative attitude toward things that were closely associated with the sea (and which for many groups had a good connotation): trade and many of its products. The most common term in biblical Hebrew for one who engages in trade is "a Canaanite".<sup>12</sup> Canaanites were obviously not viewed positively in the Iron Age society which produced much of the Bible. Whether most traders were Canaanites or not, the term indicates that the trading profession, too, was viewed negatively. And in King and Stager's (2001, 190) words: "[A]t least in their propaganda the Israelites were condescending toward traders and commerce". The negative attitudes are also reflected in the extreme rarity of imported pottery in most Israelite sites (Faust, 2006a; 2006b).

### **Conclusions**

We can now connect all the different lines of evidence into a coherent picture. The Sharon, the kingdom of Israel's major outlet to the sea, was practically devoid of significant settlement during most of the Iron Age II, and especially during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This, despite the fact that this era was a period of intensive maritime trade and a period in which Israel had a prominent political position. The archaeological evidence is matched by the lack of references to the region in the Bible, the latter clearly reflecting its emptiness (and more, see below).

It is likely that part of the emptiness of the Sharon resulted from ecological conditions. The Sharon is a very problematic ecological niche, and even minor changes can affect it. This, however, seems insufficient to explain the almost complete desolation of an area that prospered only 150 years earlier, and which will prosper even farther some 250 years later; and especially given the rela-

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<sup>12</sup> For example in Hosea 12:8: "A Canaanite, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress" (see also Isaiah 23:8; Job 40:30; Proverbs 31:24; Zephania 1:11; some of which are traditionally dated to the Iron Age II; see also Elat, 1977, 203; 1979, 529; Liver, 1962, 204; Faust, 2006a; 2006b).

tively dense settlement in the other part of the coastal plain (e. g., north of the Carmel) at the time.

We have, however, clear evidence that the Israelites had a very negative attitude toward the sea. As clearly manifested in the Bible, they were afraid of the sea. Furthermore, as is reflected both linguistically and textually, and seems to be confirmed archaeologically, the Israelites rejected even things that were associated with the sea, for example trade.

Notably, while problematic for the study of historical events, the biblical texts are excellent source for cultural inquiries, and the biblical references mentioned above give us an insight into the discussed society's perceptions (e. g., King/Stager, 2001, 7). By using the text as a cultural document, the present approach, if to use Dark's (1995, 57) words,

“places texts and maps in the same role as anthropological descriptions or natural scientific laws. [...] Unlike these sources, as products of the society under study, they enable us to give *interpretation from* within that society. That is, they may enable us to give the same interpretation to archaeological material as people from within that society would have given” (emphasize in the original).

Such texts allow us to examine the archaeological evidence within its original context, and strengthen our interpretation (also Hodder, 1991). When examining the references for the Sharon, it is obvious that it was viewed as empty, desolate and frightening, probably reflecting both, its ecological conditions and also its associations with the sea. Whether this view *resulted* from the Sharon being empty, swampy and dangerous (and probably also infected with diseases like Malaria), or had deeper roots, is not our concern here, but it is possible that the conditions on Israel's coast increased an already existing tendency.

The combination of the problematic ecology and the very strong negative attitudes toward the sea and trade made this area lie in relative desolation for most of the Iron Age II, despite the general demographic prosperity. After all, the only theoretical incentive to settle this harsh region was for maritime activity, but this was not desired at the time. Only when other peoples settled the region – the Canaanites (during the Middle Bronze and Late Bronze Ages) and Phoenicians (during the Persian Period) – was the Sharon more densely settled. The kingdom of Israel, who had an interest (and need) to use the sea at the time discussed here, had to recourse to more northern cities, closer to the frontier with Phoenicia.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that these sites had a large non-Israelite segment in the

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<sup>13</sup> A strong necessity and a strong government could have settled the region, of course, as can be seen by its flourishing in the Iron Age IIA, most likely the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Faust, 2007). The Sharon, and mainly the Yarkon basin, were Jerusalem's (the capital of the United Monarchy) only outlets the sea. The central government had, therefore, a real interest in developing this region, and this is reflected in the many sites that existed at the time. In this regard, the biblical narratives (which mention the region in texts pertaining to this era) seem to be matched by the flourishing settlements that existed at the time, and

population (for the heterogeneity of the population in the kingdom of Israel, see Faust, 2000; Finkelstein, 1999), and they conducted the various maritime activities in conjuncture with the Phoenicians' ships.<sup>14</sup> When examining the relations between ecology and human activity, it is quite clear, in light of the above, that while ecological conditions have an important impact on human settlement, it is also culture that makes a difference (see also Rosen/Rosen, 2001). The same ecological niche, as problematic as it is, hosted larger settlement in various periods, including the Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age and the Persian period, and also in the Iron Age IIA, probably the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE (when a central government needed it), so the more important element appears to be the incentive and motivation of the relevant society. The Israelite society viewed the region negatively, and this is the *main* reason for its desolation during most of the Iron Age II.

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hint to the existence of the central authority (the issue is not of crucial importance for the present paper; see Faust, 2007; recently, Herzog/Singer-Avitz (2011) attempted to divide the various Iron Age IIA levels between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but this does not seem convincing. The issue will be dealt with in more detail elsewhere).

<sup>14</sup> Though the reasons were probably different, one cannot resist the temptation to equate the reality during the Iron Age with that of the Mamluk period (13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), when the Mamluk rulers systematically de-settled the coastal region (Ayalon, 1965).

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