Memory in Ruins

For nearly a century, biblical archaeology has been a pillar of the Jewish national revival. Its professional approach, combined with its often dramatic capacity to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel, has done much to convince the world that the Bible is not mere myth, but a document that reflects the truth concerning central periods in Israel's history.

Today, however, biblical archaeology has reached a crossroads. Seeking to reconstruct the historical record from scratch, a new school of Bible scholars, historians, and archaeologists has argued that nearly every major story of the Hebrew Bible is little more than a fabrication. Particular attention has focused on the kingdom of David and Solomon, whose authenticity was until recently considered substantiated beyond doubt. According to the new theory, this kingdom never existed.

The challenge to the historicity of the united Israelite kingdom is hardly a concern for academics alone. The era of David and Solomon is the classical, formative period in Jewish political history, analogous to that of Athenian democracy or the early Roman Republic in the history of the West. It is a symbol, of course; but like all important symbols, it also holds out hope for the future: The hope that the Jews may again become a politically and religiously united people, powerful and independent, yet at the same time morally and culturally elevated, at peace with man and God. The current claim that this kingdom is not historical at all, but was

fabricated by later authors for political purposes, is therefore a matter of profound concern not only for Jews, but for all people who view the Hebrew Bible as a central part of their heritage.

It is, of course, true that academic research must never be distorted to serve the public interest. If there really was no kingdom of David and Solomon, then scholars ought to say so. Yet the quality of the work on which the new thinking is based leaves a great deal to be desired, and when this fact is combined with the timing of its publication—in the midst of a wave of historical revisionism that has left hardly a Jewish symbol unscathed—one cannot avoid the suspicion that in the new archaeology, as elsewhere in academia, the urge to smash myths has overtaken sound judgment, to the detriment of archaeological science and of the broader public, as well.

For nearly two millennia after its completion, the Bible's overall story line was widely viewed as more or less accurate. Though many readers, including religious Jews and Christians, did not accept every detail in the biblical account—the descriptions of miracles in particular were greeted with skepticism—it was broadly accepted that a distinct Israelite people arose about 3,500 years ago; that this people was enslaved in Egypt, entered Canaan, and ultimately established a unified kingdom under David and Solomon; that this realm was divided into the kingdoms of Israel and Judea; that the fall of the latter in 586 B.C.E. led to the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile; and that this exile was followed, half a century later, by the Jews' return to the land in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

In the nineteenth century, this view was called into question by scholars who argued on the basis of textual analysis that the Bible was—in the words of Julius Wellhausen, who popularized the documentary hypothesis and the school of "Higher Criticism"—little more than a "glorified mirage." But when these scholars were drawing their conclusions, no significant

archaeological work had been done. It was largely in response to this challenge that a group of researchers came to Palestine in the early twentieth century to learn the truth about the biblical period by digging for its physical remains.

The best-known among them, William Foxwell Albright, who was trained in both biblical scholarship and the cultures and languages of the ancient Near East, founded a school which became the dominant force in biblical archaeology for most of the twentieth century. Albright's students included the renowned Israeli archaeologists Yigael Yadin, Benjamin Mazar, and Yohanan Aharoni; and American scholars such as Nelson Glueck and the historian John Bright, whose *A History of Israel* (1960) became a classic in the English-speaking world. While some of their conclusions about the biblical events did not hold up over decades of archaeological discovery, these scholars still had an important understanding of the role archaeology could play in writing history, one that was compelling in its own day and may have a great deal to offer in the current debate.

Albright was neither a religious fundamentalist nor a biblical literalist. His method was, as he explained, to steer "as cautiously as possible between the Scylla of overreliance on tradition and the Charybdis of hypercriticism." His approach was that of the humanist scholar, dedicated to uncovering the roots of Western civilization and its unparalleled achievement. "What we have in mind," he wrote in 1942, "is nothing less than the ultimate reconstruction, as far as possible, of the route which our cultural ancestors traversed in order to reach Judeo-Christian heights of spiritual insight and ethical monotheism." For Albright, the aim of archaeology was not just to examine and catalogue artifacts, or to use them selectively to "prove" the Bible, but to weave them together with ancient texts and traditions into a reliable historical narrative, one that may teach Western man about his origins in the distant past.

Beginning with Albright's excavations in the late 1920s and continuing through those of his students until the mid-1980s, a remarkable number of

finds affirmed and enriched the biblical history. Clear evidence of a distinct people, possessing its own material culture and showing up at the dawn of the Iron Age—just the right time from the biblical perspective—appeared in hundreds of highland sites stretching from the Galilee to the Negev. Dozens of ancient Jewish, Canaanite, and Philistine cities were excavated and found to contain remains that corresponded surprisingly well to the biblical narrative. In Shiloh, the religious and political center of the Israelite tribes in the book of Judges, the remains of an extensive twelfth-century B.C.E. Israelite community were discovered. Great cities, containing many of the building projects which the book of Kings attributes to Solomon, were excavated and identified as Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer. Even in Jerusalem, where opposition from the Arab world continues to foreclose excavation at the site of the First Temple, monumental finds were nonetheless uncovered, including biblical-era structures and fortifications in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, the Southern Wall area, and the City of David (the original town of Jerusalem first conquered by David around the year 1000 B.C.E.).

At the same time, ancient inscriptions from Egypt to Assyria provided independent confirmation of the biblical narrative. The Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah testified to the existence of a people "Israel" dwelling in Canaan around the year 1200 B.C.E.; the campaign of the pharaoh Shishak, who the book of Kings says swept through Israelite cities shortly after the death of Solomon, was confirmed by discovery of the Egyptian's own records at Karnak; the war between the Moabite king Mesha and the combined forces of Israel and Judea depicted in the book of Kings was described from Mesha's perspective on a monument found in Dibon, in western Jordan; the reign of King Jehu was confirmed in the Black Obelisk of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III discovered at Nimrud; the Assyrian siege of the city of Lachish around 700 B.C.E. was depicted vividly at the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh in northern Iraq; and a clay seal was found in Jerusalem bearing the name of Gemaryahu ben Shafan, who is described in the book of Jeremiah as the chief scribe in the court of King Jehoiakim.

As Albright confessed, his own "initially rather skeptical attitude toward the accuracy of Israelite historical tradition suffered repeated jolts as discovery after discovery confirmed the historicity of details which might reasonably have been considered legendary."

Recent scholarship, which has benefited from additional, equally dramatic finds, should be sympathetic to this view. But instead, the last two decades have seen a resurrection of the skepticism that prevailed a century ago. The stories of the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, and the conquest of Canaan have been dismissed as unreliable by a growing number of scholars, some (but not all) of whom have an overtly political agenda, arguing that the traditional account was resurrected by the Zionists to justify dispossessing the Palestinian Arabs. Perhaps the most explicit of these is Keith W. Whitelam, whose best-known work is *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (1996). In Whitelam's view,

> Western scholarship has invented ancient Israel and silenced Palestinian history.... The ancient past belongs to Israel since this is the way it has been presented from the inception of modern biblical studies. Modern Israeli scholarship has been concerned with the history of ancient Israel written largely from a Western and Orientalist perspective as the ancient expression of the modern state and its Jewish population.

Drawing heavily on the ideas of literary scholar and political activist Edward Said, Whitelam sees his principal task as the creation of an alternate, "Palestinian" account of ancient history. "The problem here," he writes, "is that the notion of a 'Palestinian history' is confined to the modern period, an attempt to articulate accounts of national identity in the face of dispossession and exile. It is as if the ancient past has been abandoned to Israel and the West."

The challenge to the biblical narrative reached new heights in the late 1990s, when scholars at Tel Aviv University, led by Israel Finkelstein, chairman of the university's Department of Archaeology, began championing a theory that the unified Israelite monarchy, accounts of which occupy large portions of the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, never really existed. Finkelstein's theory is based on what archaeologists call a "lower" dating of the period, a change in the way dates are assigned to artifacts. This approach reclassifies the archaeological finds long associated with the Solomonic building projects of the tenth century B.C.E. and dates them a century later, thus moving them to the period after the united monarchy, and leaving that kingdom with no reliable testimony. In other words, if we accept that the massive structures uncovered throughout Israel were built not by Solomon, but by his successors a century later, then the founders of the ancient Jewish state all but disappear from the archaeological record.

This contention first reached a mass audience in the *Ha'aretz* weekend magazine of October 29, 1999, in a cover story called "Truth from the Holy Land: After 70 Years of Digging, It Turns Out the Biblical Period Never Happened." The author, Ze'ev Herzog, Finkelstein's colleague at Tel Aviv University, declared that "the great unified monarchy was an imaginary historiosophic creation, invented at the end of the Judean period, at the very earliest." Articles in *Science* and *The New York Times* followed, highlighting Finkelstein's claim that, as he told the *Times*, "there is no evidence whatsoever for a great, united monarchy which ruled from Jerusalem over large territories." King David's Jerusalem, he added, "was no more than a poor village at the time."

In 2001, the theory that the united kingdom was a fiction came of age with the publication of Finkelstein's book, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*, co-authored with Neil Asher Silberman. The book's controversial thesis and its release by a major commercial publisher helped propel it onto best-seller lists in the United States. When the Hebrew edition of *The Bible Unearthed* appeared in Israel in the spring of 2003, it too became an instant

best-seller. Riding a tidal wave of sympathetic media exposure, Finkelstein's theory seems destined to become the common wisdom.

Given the magnitude of the challenge, one would expect a sustained response from the many scholars who remain skeptical of the new approach. And to a certain extent, there has been such a response. In the four years since the controversy erupted, some of the leading archaeologists in Israel have undertaken to refute Finkelstein's theory. The efforts of the Hebrew University's Amnon Ben-Tor and Amihai Mazar, writing in academic journals such as *Levant* and giving numerous scholarly lectures, have gone a long way toward convincing their colleagues that the conventional dating is in fact correct. Baruch Halpern of the University of Pennsylvania, who worked closely with Finkelstein in the excavation of Megiddo that helped form the basis for the theory, has likewise dismissed it out of hand. "In history, the issue is probability, not absolute proof," Halpern told one newsmagazine recently, "and probability is overwhelmingly on the side of the traditional dating."

Yet one would never know this by reading the newspapers and magazines covering the controversy. In the media, both in English and in Hebrew, the new archaeology has completely dominated. This is not so much because it has captured a consensus of archaeological opinion, but because the mainstream archaeologists who oppose it seem to lack the desire or ability to engage their opponents on the level of public debate. While Finkelstein and Herzog have made their case through books, articles, and interviews, their academic opponents have shown a remarkable unconcern, and even impatience, for what the wider public considers to be the most important questions: Does the biblical account reflect what actually happened, and how do the conclusions of archaeology affect our understanding of history?

Indeed, while the new archaeologists' demolition of the kingdom of David and Solomon has begun to change the way Jews and Christians view their own past, Israel's mainstream archaeologists have long abandoned the

effort to produce accessible publications on the history of the period, and have focused instead on producing detailed compendia of archaeological finds. Perhaps the most important work by an Israeli archaeologist in the past two decades is Amihai Mazar's *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (1990), a glance at which will reveal that this field has become so specialized as to abandon all pretense of contributing to the construction of a historical narrative. While this 550-page tome does break down the data according to broad periods (Neolithic, Early Bronze Age, and so on), this is where the chronology ends, and each chapter offers little more than a catalogue of findings, listed according to type ("Israelite pottery," "metallurgy") or location ("The Northern Negev," "The Judean Desert"). Not only is there no effort to weave these findings into a history of the area; there is not even an attempt to synthesize an archaeological perspective on what kind of life the inhabitants of these houses and villages might have lived. Albright's humanist approach to the ancient past is dismissed as "simplistic and fundamental," while the current approach is praised as "professional, secular, and free from theological prejudices."

Little better is *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (1992), edited by Amnon Ben-Tor, which is not so much a work of history as a catalogue of the material remains left by Jews, Canaanites, Philistines, and Egyptians. Despite being an ardent defender of the biblical description of the unified monarchy, Ben-Tor is nonetheless mystified by the idea that archaeology may have an impact on the public's beliefs. Attempts to improve our understanding of biblical history on the basis of the archaeological record, he writes, are simply irrational:

> Terms such as "defense" and "verification" of the Bible… are completely out of place. Does religion need to be defended? Can biblical truths be proven? What has all this to do with religious belief?… It would be nigh impossible to estimate the amounts of money and human energy wasted in futile efforts such as the searches for Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat, the tomb of Moses at Mount Nebo, Pharaoh's hordes in the Sea of Reeds, or the remains of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Dead Sea, all fueled by an

irrational impulse to prove the historical authenticity of the biblical narrative….

For scholars like Ben-Tor, the question of what archaeology may mean for the larger issue of Jewish history is not just unimportant, but also a "violation of archaeological integrity," a danger to the scientific standing of the discipline. The desire to determine the veracity of biblical history is, according to Ben-Tor, the "root of all evil as far as the discipline of biblical archaeology is concerned."

With such attitudes prevailing in the academy, it is not surprising to discover that today's mainstream archaeologists are inclined to play down finds which strike them as too highly charged with biblical or historical import. A poignant example is that of Adam Zertal, whose survey of the Samaria region is a standard in the field. In 1983, Zertal uncovered on Mount Eval a raised structure about 25 feet square, flanked by stone ramps, and filled with ashes and animal bones. This enormous sacrificial altar, which was absolutely unique for its time in the entire Near East, was located on the very mountain where Joshua was described in the Bible as having built an altar after the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, and closely matched the descriptions of that altar in both biblical and rabbinic texts. The site contained tools dating to the twelfth century B.C.E., around the time the Israelites are said to have entered the land. To top it off, the remains in the altar's fill did not include pig bones—a marker for Israelite settlement whose validity even skeptics generally concede.

Nonetheless, the reaction of leading archaeologists ranged from dismissal to tepid agnosticism, accompanied by accusations that Zertal was motivated politically by a desire to support West Bank settlement. Zertal, a secular Jew raised on a kibbutz, was shocked not so much by the accusations as by the grim silence that followed. "After the publication of the discovery in the 1980s, there were a few debates," he recalls, "but since the detailed report and many articles that I published concerning the excavation and the survey, silence has descended on the scholarly world."

A similar reception has greeted other archaeologists whose efforts have led them to the brink of what may well be decisive discoveries concerning the biblical period. While momentous First-Temple-era finds were uncovered in Jerusalem in the two decades beginning in 1967, archaeological efforts since 1987 have avoided work that might lead to better understanding of the content and meaning of biblical history. Instead, research has focused on either pre- or post-biblical sites, whereas *not one* major biblical-era excavation has been undertaken in Jerusalem. This is despite the fact that significant evidence has emerged pointing to where archaeologists might find major biblical-era constructions, such as the wall Solomon built around Jerusalem and the actual palace of King David. Yet no efforts have been launched in these or other similar cases.

Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that scholars such as Finkelstein and Herzog can declare Jerusalem at the time of David and Solomon to be "no more than a poor village," and elicit little response. The evidence needed to refute this claim may well be within reach. Some of the sites that could be explored in the hope of putting this claim to rest are well known. And yet they are systematically ignored, while attention and funding are lavished on projects of little interest to the non-specialist.

What is the appropriate response to the new archaeology?

The first step is to recognize just how fragile are the conclusions which Finkelstein and his school have produced. Traditional biblical archaeology, while far from perfect, has the advantage of corroborative evidence in the form of the biblical text itself. Given two plausible interpretations of an archaeological find, one that matches the biblical account and one that does not, it is reasonable to prefer the biblical reading. This is not because the biblical text is assumed to be accurate in all cases. It is because the two sources—the find and the text—lend support to each other. This way of looking at the Bible is no different from the way historians treat the testimony of any other ancient text that appears to shed light on archaeological finds.

The new archaeology, by contrast, is extremely limited in what it can tell us with confidence, a fact that stems directly from its principled refusal to credit the biblical narrative as a legitimate corroborative source. Thus a stone wall discovered in a dig may be incontrovertibly determined to be a stone wall, but nearly every meaningful conclusion about it—that it is part of a palace and not a citadel; that it was built in the ninth century B.C.E. and not in the seventh; that it was destroyed by one invading king and not another; or even that it was built by one people and not another—is a matter of interpretation. These conclusions are sometimes based on extrapolation from similar examples, or on deduction from theories concerning political or cultural conditions that are themselves highly speculative. Unlike the conclusions produced in the experimental sciences, "purely" archaeological histories are thus based on mountains of guesswork and creative gap-filling. If archaeology is ever going to produce a more reliable history, it *needs* the input of historical documents. And when one dismisses the most detailed document that exists concerning the biblical period, the result is to set archaeology on a path of unconstrained conjecture.

This is especially important with regard to the new theories concerning the kingdom of David and Solomon. The crucial fact is that there have been *no* new discoveries in the field of archaeology that cast doubt on the authenticity of the massive structures and fortifications that have until now been attributed to the united kingdom. Moreover, the finds that have turned up in recent years only lend support to the biblical story. Perhaps the most stunning archaeological discovery in the last decade was the first extrabiblical reference to David, an inscription found at Tel Dan in 1993, describing a battle fought against a king of the "house of David." Trapped by their own paradigm, the more extreme skeptics went as far as dismissing the simple reading of the text, concocting alternate readings that relieved them of having to admit that the "house of David" ever existed. But for the vast majority of scholars (including Finkelstein), this discovery was taken as conclusive evidence that, at the very least, a king named David lived and reigned, and founded a dynasty somewhere in the ancient Near East. And

although Finkelstein may stand firm in his minimalist reading, maintaining that David and Solomon were nonetheless "little more than hill country chieftains," for most of his colleagues the Tel Dan inscription offered significant support for the historicity of the unified Israelite kingdom depicted in the Bible.

But the most important lesson from the Tel Dan discovery, and others like it, is that there is still a great deal of biblical history that remains buried, waiting to be found. Indeed, if the pace of biblical-era discoveries has slowed dramatically in recent years, it is not because archaeologists have come out of biblical-era excavations empty-handed, but because they essentially called off the search. In this regard, the apathy of mainstream researchers dovetails with the aims of the revisionists: The former stop looking for biblical-era remains, and the latter seize upon the lack of new discoveries to conclude that "after seventy years of digging," anything that has not yet been discovered never will be. But in reality, underneath the surface in hundreds of sites around the Near East, there remains a vast archive of Jewish history, which seven decades of biblical archaeology—regardless of the scholars' exhausted cries to the contrary—have only begun to tap.

The claims of the new archaeology are dramatic, but weak, while the prospects for finding decisive evidence to refute them remain quite good. To realize that potential, what is needed is something that is simple, yet extraordinarily challenging in the current intellectual climate: The leading biblical archaeologists, whether from Israel or abroad, should return to their calling as it was practiced by the founders of their craft. This means carrying out excavations in Israel and elsewhere, whose purpose is to elucidate the history of the biblical era—a period which is not yet well understood, but which continues to exert a profound influence on the mind and spirit of mankind.

In addition, mainstream scholars must take upon themselves the difficult yet crucial task of weaving the research into a coherent history, rather than just presenting detailed exhibits of the data. This kind of writing, of which Albright's *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (1940) remains the classic text, is the most important vehicle for imparting historical knowledge. Though it may well be unreasonable to expect every specialist in the field to paint on a canvas as broad as Albright's, there is no reason why such writing should not be held up as a model. Only ambitious efforts of this kind, aimed at intelligent lay readers and not just specialists, can prevent the narrative proposed by the new archaeology from becoming an unchallenged orthodoxy.

The broader public, and not only scholars, has a role to play as well. For many years following the establishment of Israel, archaeology was something of a national pastime, turning the whole country into a classroom for the study of ancient Jewish history, and offering the public a direct encounter with the stones with which its own past was built. Private foundations, universities, and government agencies joined in the effort, while thousands of volunteers and scholars took part in the search. All this came in response to a profound need on the part of the Israeli public, and of the wider Jewish and Christian public around the world, to discover ancient Israel. A redoubled effort of this sort would reflect the conviction that fifty years into the Israeli experiment, this need has not waned.

The assault on the traditional biblical narrative does not bear the markings of good science; nor must it inevitably triumph in the battle of ideas. If it serves as a wake-up call to the archaeological establishment, which has closed itself to both the need for new excavations and the broader implications of Jewish history, it might well lead to a greater understanding of the origins of our people, and of civilization as a whole.

David Hazony, for the Editors
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