

THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL ISRAEL  
Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel

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## A SUMMARY ASSESSMENT FOR PART 1

*Brian B. Schmidt*

Professor Israel Finkelstein initiates his introductory essay with a précis on the relationship between archaeology and the biblical text in modern scholarship. He begins with the nineteenth-century higher-biblical critic Julius Wellhausen and continues well into the twentieth century with what he views as the two dominant opposing schools that emerged, the German and the Anglo-American traditions. Finkelstein adopts as his general starting point that of the higher-critical approach along with some important recent revisions, while he sums up the Anglo-American school as essentially a conservative approach. In the latter case, archaeology has played only a supportive role to the sequential straightforward reading of the biblical text, or, as Finkelstein describes it, “a modern, almost word-for-word rewriting of the biblical story.” He then suggests that this in turn explains, at least in part, why biblical archaeology “stalled” in terms of its contributions to the wider field of archaeology. He ends his survey with a summary and critique of a third, more-recent school, that of the so-called minimalists. He describes the minimalist position as follows: “Biblical history totally lacks an historical basis and its character as a largely fictional composition or wholly imaginative history is motivated by the theology of the time of its compilation in the Persian or Hellenistic periods, centuries after the alleged events took place. At best, it contains only vague and quite unreliable information about early Israel. Yet, the continuing power of the biblical narrative is testimony to the literary skill of the authors as they produced a compelling propagandistic work to a highly receptive public.”

Finkelstein, however, notes that archaeological surveys, settlement studies, and extra-biblical historical records converge with the biblical traditions at numerous points having to do with geographical and historical matters pertaining to the Iron Age. He asks rhetorically whether or not this is mere coincidence and then goes on to describe such a possibility as “amazing” and the extensive administrative details in the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy or Joshua through 2 Kings) “unnecessary,” that is, if it is purely a

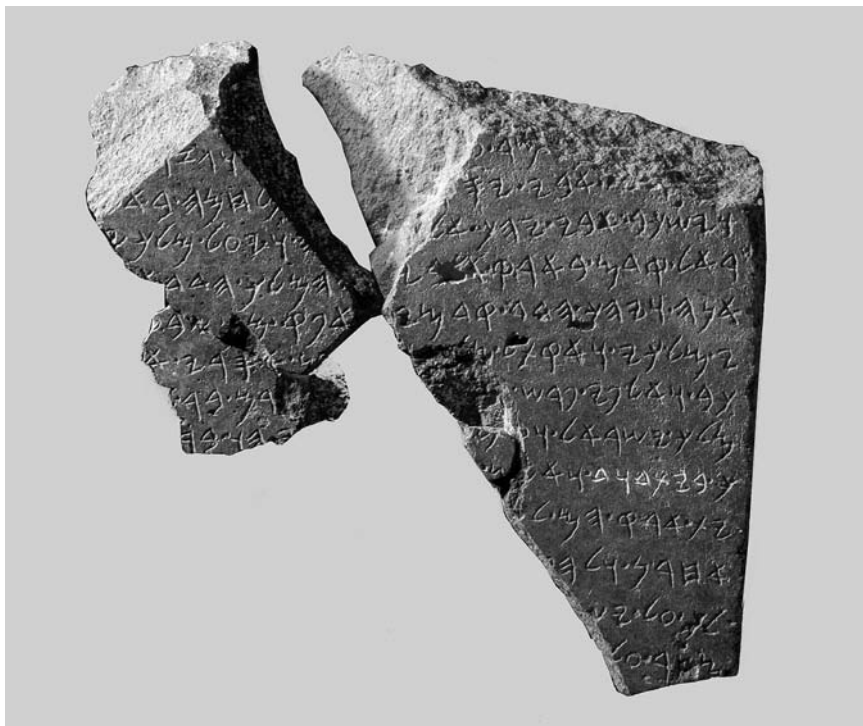


Fig. 1. The Tel Dan inscription. Photo courtesy of Zev Radovan.

mythic history. Among other arguments supporting the convergence of these otherwise independent lines of historical information, Finkelstein invokes the Iron II-period reference to the occurrence of the name (and dynasty) of David, “the House of David” or *bytdwd* in the Tel Dan inscription (fig. 1), a fragment of a larger commemorative stele erected most probably by Hazael, king of Damascus, following his conquest of the Galilee. This datum strikes a serious blow to the minimalist position he described earlier on the non-historicity of the biblical character that goes by the same name.

Finkelstein boldly claims that archaeology is the only real-time witness to events described in the biblical text, particularly those relating to the formative phases of early Israelite history. This is so because the biblical text is dominated by theological and ideological themes of the authors and their times. Finkelstein cites three examples of archaeology’s contribution to the quest for the early historical Israel. First, he cites the archaeological evidence for the importance of Shiloh in the late-eleventh to the early-tenth centuries B.C.E. and its insignificance during the following Iron II period. Then he refers

to the evidence for a society in the Iron I period that included bands of migratory peoples wandering along the margins of urban developments while the same areas in the Iron II period were densely settled and migratory bands no longer existed. Finally, Finkelstein invokes the material cultural data documenting the prominence of the Philistine city of Gath (Tell eṣ-Şâfi) in the ninth century B.C.E. and earlier, as well as its demise over the course of the following two centuries.

These he concludes, affirm the antiquity of portions of the stories about David and his times in 1 Samuel, and specifically those traditions concerning Shiloh's importance, those about David and his band of renegades wandering along the southern reaches of Judah, and the references to Philistine Gath's prominence in the David stories. For Finkelstein, all three also allow him to generalize in the following fashion; preserved in biblical traditions are older myths, tales, and memories that served as the nuclei for the stories composed by biblical authors. Although older stories can on occasion and in exceptional cases be detected in the biblical texts, more typically they are preserved in such a manner that reflect multiple layers and multiple realities from an earlier past and are at other times too well integrated into the ideology of the later biblical authors to be isolated in any meaningful way. Thus, as his own methodological starting point, Finkelstein proposes that biblical history should be read through the filter of its point of departure, which for him is the period of its compilation in late-monarchic times, most likely during the reign of King Josiah—not the later Persian or Hellenistic periods as the minimalists have proposed, or, for that matter, the earlier tenth century as Anglo-American scholarship has traditionally upheld. As the archaeological evidence seems to indicate, this is the period of Judah's dramatic growth toward full statehood and widespread literacy and, more to the point, it is from this period of Israel's early history that the biblical traditions can provide the modern historian with the most amount of socio-historical information.

Professor Amihai Mazar introduces his essay by surveying the modern history of archaeology in Israel as well as some of the major changes and new directions that biblical archaeology has undergone in terms of its methods and goals. He defends the concept of a "biblical archaeology" as referring to archaeological activity that pertains to the world of the Bible and as upholding what he views as the essential relationship between artifact and text. He then turns to the question of the historical relevance of the biblical text for reconstructing early Israel's history. For Mazar, this issue lies at the heart of the current controversy over the modern quest for the historical Israel. One means of productively pursuing that question is to employ the findings of archaeology as an independent, if not the primary, witness to the ancient historical reality and as a litmus test for assessing the historical relevance of

any given biblical text. Archaeology, for Mazar, remains invaluable in spite of the subjective aspects of the enterprise. Mazar's provisional conclusion regarding the historical relevance of the biblical texts is that, in spite of the literary creativity and ideological biases of the writers as well as the presence of textual complexities resulting from other mediating influences, blocks of biblical materials may have historical relevance and may even preserve ancient pre-Israelite local memories. He lists as examples of what he deems as earlier materials and sources the following: archives in Jerusalem's temple library, palace archives, public commemorative inscriptions (on the analogy provided by the Mesha and Tel Dan inscriptions), oral transmission of ancient poetry (for example, Gen 49, Deut 32, and Judg 5), folk and aetiological stories rooted in the remote past (for example, portions of the Exodus and Conquest narratives, the deeds of the Judges, and biographical information on Saul, David, and Solomon), and historiographic writings explicitly mentioned by the biblical writers (for example, "the books of the chronicles of the kings of Israel").

For Mazar, accepted historical methods, external written sources and archaeological finds enable us to extract reliable historical information embedded in the biblical texts with archaeology functioning as a control tool offering increased objectivity. Mazar cites as an example of this the convergence of historical data from the Assyrian royal inscriptions, the Mesha inscription, the Tel Dan inscription, and the biblical text. Mazar concludes that these written sources, when taken together, confirm that the general historical framework of the Deuteronomistic History relating to the ninth century B.C.E. was based on reliable knowledge of that time period. Even so, Mazar remains more skeptical about the modern enterprise of writing an accurate history of early Israel and especially when it comes to the earliest stages of her past. He imagines the historical perspective preserved in the Bible as a telescope looking back in time. The farther back one goes from what Mazar views as the pivotal period of biblical composition, that is, the eighth to seventh centuries B.C.E., the more imaginative, symbolic, distorted, and "foggier" that past becomes. In addition, one must take into account the impact that such factors as distortion, selectivity, memory loss, censorship, and ideological or personal bias might have brought to bear on the composition of the resultant biblical traditions.



## DIGGING FOR THE TRUTH: ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

*Israel Finkelstein*

The question of the historicity of the biblical narrative as it pertains to ancient Israel and the ability of archaeology to contribute toward a better understanding of the text have hovered like black clouds over both academic research and public discussion for decades. The debates have been shaped not only by academic research in the fields of archaeology and biblical studies, but also by the cultural and historical processes in our own society. In recent years, we have seen a new “high tide” in the discussion, this time focusing on the problem of the United Monarchy and, in a way, on the question of the validity of the *entire* historical narrative in the Bible.

In the early days of scholarship, the battle over the history of early Israel was fought between a conservative school of thought, including the classical biblical archaeologists, and the higher-critical biblical scholars. A minimalist school, which rejected altogether the value of biblical history for the study of the history of Canaan/Israel in the Iron Age, joined this debate in the 1990s. Without engaging in a detailed survey of the history of research, I wish first to deal with the pros and cons of these two camps—the conservative and the minimalist—and then to turn to my own point of view, representing what I would describe as the voice of the center.

The major proposals of the higher-critical scholars of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries have, in my opinion, withstood the test of time. Admittedly, the assault of the last few decades on the Documentary Hypothesis and the model of a Deuteronomistic History have required that some revisions be made to these theories, but no convincing paradigms have been offered that can replace these models. In my view, they still provide a coherent historical and literary approach to the questions of structure, time, and *Sitz im Leben* as these pertain to the biblical text.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CONSERVATIVE CAMP

Scholars in the conservative camp follow the biblical text on the history of Israel in the way the ancient writers wanted us to read it, that is, as a reliable record of Israel's history, narrated in sequential chronological order, from earlier to later periods. Conservative scholars agree that the biblical materials—be they the Pentateuch or the Deuteronomistic History—reached their final shape relatively late in the history of Israel. Nevertheless, others would still claim a tenth- to ninth-century date for the crystallization of much of the material in the Pentateuch and would argue that, in both literary works, the later redactors incorporated early traditions, and even older written sources. While it may be true that only a few in the conservative camp would still try to identify a “Period of the Patriarchs” in the second millennium B.C.E., or explain the destruction of a major Late Bronze Age city as the result of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, many would still read the description of the Exodus on an Egyptian New Kingdom background. Moreover, all scholars in this camp would stand behind the biblical portrayal of a glorious United Monarchy.

In the early days, conservative scholars deployed archaeology to help defeat the higher criticism of scholars such as Julius Wellhausen. William F. Albright, followed by his students (and their disciples in our own days), promoted the idea that archaeology can prove the Bible correct and the critical scholars wrong. Two main case studies were put to the test: the Conquest of Canaan and the great United Monarchy of King Solomon. But the truth of the matter is that archaeology was not given center stage in the debate. It was used only in order to support a preconceived theory. Archaeology played the role of supplying decorative evidence for a history that was a modern, almost word-for-word rewriting of the biblical story. By doing that, scholars of the conservative school promoted historical and archaeological reconstructions that had no actual support in the finds, or were trapped in circular argumentation.

One of the best examples for the first case is the search for biblical Ezion-geber. In the late 1930s, the search for the great Solomon led the archaeologist Nelson Glueck to excavate Tell el-Kheleifeh, a small mound at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba located on the modern border between Israel and Jordan. Glueck identified the site with Ezion-geber, the port from which, so the Bible says, King Solomon launched trade expeditions to exotic lands afar. Glueck uncovered much of the site, separated the remains into five periods of activity, dated them from the tenth to the fifth centuries B.C.E., and identified each according to the biblical references to Ezion-geber and Eilat. Every monarch who was mentioned in the Bible in relation to activities in the Gulf of Aqaba was granted an archaeological stratum. Glueck interpreted

the remains of the first period—including what he described as flue holes, air channels, hand bellows, clay crucibles, and furnace rooms—as evidence for a huge copper-smelting industry in the days of King Solomon. Glueck went so far as to dub Ezion-geber the “Pittsburgh of Palestine” and King Solomon “a copper king, a shipping magnate, a merchant prince, and a great builder.”

This romantic image later proved to be a fantasy, a wishful illusion based on the biblical text rather than on actual archaeological evidence. A thorough study of the finds has found no evidence whatsoever for smelting activity at the site. The “crucibles” proved to be sherds of locally produced, handmade pottery vessels; the “flue holes” were no more than holes for wooden beams that had rotted away; and there were only a few metallic finds—certainly no evidence of an active smelting industry. No less important, it became clear that the site was established only in the late-eighth or early-seventh century B.C.E. The elaborate stratigraphy of successive kings and their industrial center simply did not exist. In fact, at the time of the historical Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E., this place near the shore of the Gulf of Aqaba was no more than a sand dune.

A good case for demonstrating the second problem—that of circular argumentation—can be found at Gezer. William G. Dever, the excavator of the site and an outspoken student of the Albrightian, or conservative, school of thought, argued that the reconstruction of a great Solomonic United Monarchy is based on solid archaeological evidence, which is based, in turn, on meticulous study of Iron Age pottery: “The pottery from this destruction layer [at Gezer—I.F.] included distinctive forms of red-slipped and slipped and hand burnished (polished) pottery, which have always been dated to the late tenth century. . . . Thus, on commonly accepted *ceramic* grounds—not on naive acceptance of the Bible’s stories . . .—we dated the Gezer Field III city walls and gates to the mid-late tenth century.” Dever refers here to one of the highlights of the Gezer excavations, the notion that red-slipped and burnished pottery can be used as a peg for dating tenth-century strata. But red-slipped and burnished pottery does not carry a date label. So how was it dated to the tenth century B.C.E.? It was so dated on the basis of its find spot—in a layer linked to a gate that was associated with King Solomon on the basis of a single biblical verse, 1 Kgs 9:15; this is a clear case of circular reasoning.

The same holds true for the idea that some of the great compositions in biblical history took place in the tenth century B.C.E. Scholars argued that one of the sources of the Pentateuch (the J source) and much of the story of the early days of the Davidic dynasty in the books of Samuel were put in writing in Jerusalem in the days of the United Monarchy or immediately thereafter. According to them, this was a time of great enlightenment and composi-

tion of literary works. They based their theory on the biblical description of the glamorous kingdom of Solomon, including the mention of the office of scribe in his court—another clear case of circular reasoning. As I have argued time and again, archaeology shows that meaningful scribal activity appeared in Jerusalem only with the rise of Judah to full statehood in the late-eighth century B.C.E., over two centuries after the supposed days of the United Monarchy.

In short, conservative scholars, even the archaeologists among them, reconstructed the history of Israel according to the biblical text. Archaeology played only a supportive role, and this, I suppose, is the reason—contrary to statements by some of its own followers—that “classical” biblical archaeology stalled relative to world archaeology in almost every field of research, for example, in understanding the importance of environmental archaeology, in accepting the value of anthropological and ethnographic comparisons in archaeology, and in introducing studies from the exact sciences. And this is also the reason why the great thinkers of modern world archaeology did not come from the discipline of biblical archaeology. I have in mind such great American and British scholars as Flannery, Binford, Adams, Renfrew, and Braidwood.

#### THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MINIMALIST SCHOOL

According to a recent group of biblical scholars described as minimalists or deconstructionists, the historical material in the Bible that pertains to the Iron Age is a late composition dating to the Persian or even Hellenistic periods, that is, the fifth to second centuries B.C.E. It is a largely fictional composition motivated by the theology of the time of its compilation, which occurred centuries after the alleged events took place. Thus, it contains only vague and quite unreliable information about the origins and early history of Israel. According to these scholars, the continuing power of the biblical narratives is testimony to the literary skill of the authors, who stitched together old myths, folktales, imaginary records, legendary narratives, and a few memories of historical facts (about the ninth to early sixth centuries B.C.E.) into a single saga of apostasy and redemption.

Philip Davies, for example, saw the compilation of biblical history as a long process in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, with the final form of the narrative probably being created in Hasmonean Judea of the second century B.C.E. Davies depicted the authors of the biblical text as ideologues in service to the temple elite. He traced their ideology back to the political goals of the Judean priests who had returned from exile in the Persian period. As a Persian-appointed elite that ousted the local leadership of Judah, they needed to

“create” a history to legitimate their role. The Jerusalem scribes of the post-exilic period collected folktales and vague memories and skillfully wove them into a wholly imaginary history that stressed the centrality of Jerusalem, its temple, its cult, and its priests. This would have been a complete innovation, designed to establish a “national” myth of origin. According to this premise, biblical “history” was not only historically baseless, but powerful, focused propaganda that delivered an essentially made-up story of the Patriarchs, Exodus, Conquest, and the glorious golden age of David and Solomon to a credulous public.

The biblical scholar Thomas Thompson accepted the idea of a very late and almost entirely fictional “history of Israel.” He reinterpreted the archaeological evidence in order to reconstruct a multi-ethnic society in Iron Age Palestine, with no distinctive religion or ethnic identity at all. It was a heterogeneous population that was split between the regional centers at Jerusalem, Samaria, Megiddo, Lachish, and other cities. These peoples cherished their own local heroes and worshipped a large pantheon of ancient Near Eastern deities. Biblical scribes falsified that reality with its uncompromising theology of national sin and redemption. That was why, the minimalists argue, there can be no archaeological evidence of the United Monarchy, much less evidence of an historical personality like David, since both were part of a religious mythology wholly made-up by Judean scribes in the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

This revisionist theory of the Bible’s utter lack of historical value had its own logical and archaeological inconsistencies. First of all, as the biblical scholar William Schniedewind has indicated, literacy and extensive scribal activity in Jerusalem in the Persian and early-Hellenistic periods were much less influential than in the seventh century B.C.E. The assumption is inconceivable that in the fifth, or fourth, or even second centuries B.C.E., the scribes of a small, out-of-the-way temple town in the Judean mountains authored an extraordinarily long and detailed composition about the history, personalities, and events of an imaginary Iron Age “Israel” without using ancient sources.

The sheer number of name lists and details of royal administrative organization in the kingdom of Judah that are included in the Deuteronomistic History seems unnecessary for a purely mythic history. In any event, if they are all contrived or artificial, their coincidence with earlier realities is amazing. Archaeological excavations and surveys have confirmed that many of the Bible’s geographical listings—for example, of the boundaries of the tribes and the districts of the kingdom—closely match settlement patterns and historical realities in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. Equally important, the biblical scholar Baruch Halpern showed that a relatively large number

of extra-biblical historical records—mainly Assyrian—verify ninth- to seventh-century B.C.E. events described in the Bible: the mention of Omri in the Mesha stele, those of Ahab and Jehu in the Shalmaneser III inscriptions, Hezekiah in the inscriptions of Sennacherib, Manasseh in the records of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, and so on. No less significant is the fact, as indicated by the linguist, Avi Hurwitz, that much of the Deuteronomistic History is written in late-monarchic Hebrew, which is different from the Hebrew of post-exilic times.

Much of the minimalist effort has been invested in the claim that David and Solomon—the founders of the Jerusalem dynasty—are not historical figures. They argued that, like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon are not mentioned in any extra-biblical texts and should therefore be seen as legendary personalities. This argument suffered a major blow when the Tel Dan basalt stele was discovered in the mid-1990s. It comprises several fragments of a triumphal inscription written in Aramaic. The king it honored was most probably Hazael, king of Aram-Damascus, who was portrayed in both the Bible and Assyrian records as an important international player in the late-ninth century B.C.E. His battles against Israel are recorded in the books of Kings.

Though fragmentary, this inscription offered a unique perspective on the turbulent politics of the region in the ninth century B.C.E. It describes, from the Aramean perspective, the territorial conflict between Israel and Damascus in the ninth century B.C.E. and records how an Aramean king (Hazael) launched a punishing offensive against his southern enemies (ca. 840 B.C.E.), in which—so he claimed—he killed the king of Israel and his ally, the king of the “House of David” (or *bytdwd*). This was the first time that the name “David” was found in any contemporary source outside the Bible, in this case only about a century after his own supposed lifetime. Moreover, it most probably specified the names of the two later kings—Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah—both of whom are mentioned in the biblical text. Most significantly, Hazael employed a common idiom of his time by naming a state (Judah) after the founder of its ruling (or dominant) dynasty, *bytdwd*—just as the Assyrians labeled the Northern Kingdom as “the House of Omri” or *bit omri*.

#### THE VIEW FROM THE CENTER

The third camp—to which I belong and which is positioned in the center, is far from either of the other two poles I have treated above. Scholars in this camp adopt a late-monarchic (or exilic) date for a large portion of the Pentateuch and much of the Deuteronomistic History. Hence, they acknowledge the value of these texts in preserving reliable evidence on the history of Israel in monarchic times. However, they see the stories—in the way they are

presented in the text—as highly ideological and adapted to the needs of the community during the time of their compilation. Hence, the most meaningful difference from the conservative camp is that the adherents of the centrist camp tend to read the texts in the reverse direction of their canonical order, beginning with the safe anchor of the period of their compilation and reading back—*histoire regressive* as the great French historian of the *Annales* school Marc Bloch called this method. This does not mean that the texts have no historical value. It does imply, however, that in many cases, mainly regarding the formative periods in the history of ancient Israel, they provide us with far more historical information about the society and politics of the writers than about the times described in them.

This means that I would see large portions of both the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History as supplying the ideological platform for the political program of Judah in later, monarchic times. I refer to the pan-Israelite idea, which, to the best of my understanding, first surfaced in full-blown shape at that time. It argued that the Davidic kings are the only legitimate heirs to the territories of vanquished Israel and to the leadership over the Israelites still living in these territories, and that the cult of all Israelites should be centralized in the temple in Jerusalem. As such, the texts are highly ideological on both the political and theological levels. They represent the point of view of one elite faction of Judahite society (we have no idea if it ever formed the majority in late-monarchic times); they certainly do not represent the Northern Kingdom or what Morton Smith years ago called the “syncretistic” party in Judah. We can only imagine how different a history of Israel written by scribes from the Northern Kingdom or by other factions of Judahite society would be had it survived.

As highly ideological texts, even the treatment of periods close in date to the time of the compilation cannot be read uncritically. A good example—emphasized long ago by the biblical historian Nadav Na’aman—can be found in the biblical treatment of the “Assyrian century” in the history of Judah. In most of this period, Judah was ruled by three kings: father, son, and grandson. The first, Ahaz, is depicted as a sinner and as one who cooperated with the Assyrians and compromised Judah’s independence. His son Hezekiah is described as the second-most-righteous king from the lineage of David and as a hero who stood firmly and courageously against Assyria. The Deuteronomistic Historian even makes a special effort to hide the fact that Judah remained under Assyrian domination many years after the “miraculous” rescue of Jerusalem from Sennacherib. The grandson, Manasseh, who ruled in Jerusalem for over half a century, is described as the most evil of all apostates and head of all villains. The Exilic redactor of the Deuteronomistic History flatly puts the responsibility for the fall of Jerusalem on his head.

Archaeology has given us a completely different story—or at least a completely different perspective on Judahite affairs. Ahaz saved Judah from the bitter fate of the Northern Kingdom and incorporated it into the Assyrian economy. His policy led Judah to unprecedented prosperity in which Jerusalem and Judah experienced dramatic demographic growth. This was the time when Jerusalem expanded to the Western Hill. Judah apparently participated in the Assyrian-led Arabian trade and as a result, the Beer-sheba Valley flourished. In contrast, Hezekiah made a reckless decision to rebel against Assyria and was therefore responsible for the events that led to the utter devastation of Judah. Archaeology demonstrates the extent of the catastrophe. Almost every site excavated in the Shephelah and the Beer-sheba Valley revealed evidence for destruction. The Shephelah—the breadbasket of Judah—never recovered from the shock. Surveys reveal the dramatic decrease in the number of settlements there in the seventh century B.C.E.

Archaeology also shows us that Manasseh saved Judah from annihilation. Under his *Realpolitik* of cooperation with Assyria, the Southern Kingdom emerged from the ashes, was reincorporated into the Assyrian economy, and reached unprecedented prosperity. Judah increased its role in the Assyrian-led southern trade and the Beer-sheba Valley experienced a record settlement density. Judah must have been the main supplier of olives for the extensive Assyrian oil industry at Ekron (Tel Miqne). As a result, the Shephelah at least partially recovered. Ostraca, seals and seal impressions, weights and other finds indicate that in Manasseh's days, Judah enjoyed an impressive literacy rate.

The lesson here is clear and simple. If a period so close to the compilation of the text shows such a great gap between the heavy ideological construct of the biblical text and the more nuanced economic and social construct of the finds, one should be even more cautious when dealing with the description of earlier periods. The Deuteronomistic Historian could have been even more free to advance his ideology in those cases where the memory of the real events was increasingly more vague.

Once we become aware of the fact that the texts are relatively late in date, and that they preserve the stories from the subjective point of view of the needs of the writers, then we can acknowledge the tremendous power of archaeology as the real-time witness to the events. A good example is Israel's formative period, where archaeology is the only source of information. The Conquest and Judges stories, even if containing a few vague memories of heroic events, mythological or real, are almost complete expressions of the political and theological ideology of Josianic times. The Bible, then, provides only those impressions of the rise of early Israel that the late-monarchic writers wanted to—or could—give us. Only archaeology can inform us about the



material culture of the Iron I sites in the highlands, about the dispersal of their settlements, about their economy, and about their relationship with their neighbors. Archaeology also gives us the long-term perspective on the demographic history of the highlands, which reveals the origin of the settlers in the Iron I sites. And, as I will outline below, archaeology is the sole witness for the tenth century B.C.E. In short, archaeology is the “queen of the battle” when it comes to the history of early Israel—especially the formative periods.

The findings from archaeology actually go far beyond this. They can also significantly inform us about the texts themselves, for example, by providing information about their possible date of compilation. As I have already noted, many biblical scholars date two of the three main sources of the Pentateuch, J and E, to early monarchic times, in the tenth century or immediately thereafter. Many more argue that the Deuteronomistic History, even if compiled in the seventh or sixth century B.C.E., incorporated *written* material from the tenth century B.C.E. Archaeology demonstrates, however, that both of these literary theories are highly unlikely.

It is quite clear that both literary works, the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History, were meant to convey theological, cultural, and political messages. As such, they were probably directed at a wider public far beyond the circles of the writers. They were meant to be read by (or to) both the people in the capital and in the countryside of Judah. I would argue therefore that the “standardized” literary works narrating the history of Israel (in contrast to scattered, contradictory, and partial oral traditions) must have been written in an urban society, one with a high level of knowledge, sophistication, and literacy among the elite and the circles around it. They must have been written when the community was already quite advanced from the socio-political point of view and they must have been written in a period when literacy spread not only in the capital, but also to the countryside of the kingdom. As I will demonstrate below, these conditions did not materialize in Judah and Jerusalem before the late-eighth century B.C.E.

As I have already mentioned, though the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History were put in writing relatively late in Israelite history, most biblical scholars would accept that they include materials that originate from times prior to that of their written compilation. The problem is that in most cases the old memories are so vague, or so manipulated by the later writers, that the early realities in them are beyond recovery. Only archaeology can assist scholars in identifying such earlier traditions, but even then, it can do so only in part and in isolated cases. I wish briefly to demonstrate this with three examples, all from the Deuteronomistic History.

The excavations at Shiloh in the 1980s have shown beyond doubt that the site reached its peak of activity in the mid-Iron I, in the late-eleventh century

B.C.E. Throughout most of the lengthy Iron II period, there was only meager activity at the site. Shiloh seems to have been deserted. It is clear therefore that the stories in 1 Samuel about the importance of Shiloh in pre-monarchic times cannot reflect late-monarchic realities. Rather, they must represent some memories concerning the importance of the site in earlier times.

The same holds true for the cycle of stories regarding the wandering of David and his men along the southern fringe of Judah. These narratives clearly fit the description of a band of Apiru—uprooted people who lived on the margins of the society—moving in a sparsely settled region and far from the control of any central authority. This kind of background does not fit the late-monarchic period, when the area was densely settled and lacked any trace of a remaining Apiru reality. Therefore, I see no alternative but to argue that the stories reflect what I would label a continuous, “Amarna-like” social development in the Judahite hill country prior to the great demographic growth of Judah in the late-eighth century B.C.E.

The third example relates to Philistine Gath. Recent excavations at Tell eṣ-Ṣâfi, the location of this biblical city, proved that it reached its zenith in the ninth century B.C.E. At that time it may have been the largest city in Philistia, one of the most important cities in the entire country. Then, in the late-ninth century, it was besieged and put to the torch, seemingly by Hazael of Damascus. Gath never recovered from this shock. Sargon II mentions it in the late-eighth century as a dependent of Ashdod. Assyrian and biblical records from the seventh century B.C.E. list only four Philistine cities—Gath is absent. It is clear therefore that the biblical stories about the time of David, which describe Gath as the most prominent Philistine city, must preserve an early- or middle-ninth-century reality.

But there is much more than old memories in the late-monarchic composition labeled the Deuteronomistic History. It is unthinkable that the biblical authors invented stories only in order to serve their aims. Had they done that they would have lost their credibility among the people of Judah, their target population. It is more reasonable to assume that the authors collected myths, folktales, popular heroic tales, and shreds of memories known to the population of Judah and employed them in their cause. Needless to say, not everything was incorporated into the text. The authors included those stories that suited their theological and ideological agenda.

But collecting stories is one thing and preserving their older meanings and contexts is another. The underlying idea in many biblical studies of the conservative camp, that old memories were orally transmitted, unchanged through the centuries, is unrealistic and somewhat naive. Old stories must have absorbed different layers of realities on their way down through the centuries until they were put in writing. Therefore, as Neil Asher Silberman and

I have shown elsewhere, in the stories of David's rise to power and the succession of Solomon in the books of Samuel, one can identify several horizons representing different realities of the tenth to seventh centuries B.C.E.: heroic stories that may have preserved original tenth-century memories; stories about the prominence of Gath and the conquests of David that best fit the ninth century; the idea of a central Temple in Jerusalem, which may represent the period immediately following the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the late-eighth century; and stories revealing Greek influence that best fit the late-seventh century (such as the description of Goliath dressed in hoplite armor). From the ideological point of view, there is no question that the most influential social context for the composition of biblical history is that of the time of its compilation, in the late-seventh century B.C.E.

Yet, recognizing the possible historical value of isolated elements is something very different from accepting as reliable the entire story of the rise of a United Monarchy in much earlier times. Should we consider the biblical materials on the *formative* stages in the history of Israel as ahistorical and therefore useless as a source for the study of the rise of ancient Israel? The answer is both positive and negative. Positive, because the biblical materials cannot help us to reconstruct fully these early days. Negative, because they preserve much about the society and realities of the time of their writing. This is the point that I have tried to emphasize—that the main contribution of the “view from the center” is to demonstrate that these texts should not be read as a sequential history, from ancient to later times, but in reverse—from the time of the writing back to the more remote periods of history.

I would summarize by listing the following guidelines for a viable reconstruction of the early history of Israel:

1. Archaeology is the only real-time witness to many of the events described in the biblical text, mainly for the pre-ninth-century B.C.E. formative periods.
2. Biblical history cannot be read as a modern chronicle. It is dominated by the theological and ideological themes of the authors.
3. Biblical history cannot be read in a simplistic way, from early to late. Rather, the point of departure must be a thorough knowledge of the social, economic, and geopolitical realities of the composition period in late-monarchic times (and later, in some cases).
4. There are many old stories in the text, but they are described in a way that fits the ideology of the later authors.
5. Many of the texts are comprised of several layers; only archaeology and extra-biblical sources can help identify and separate them.
6. The starting point for the compilation of the biblical text is the sudden growth of Judah to full statehood as a direct outcome of the fall of

the Northern Kingdom and the integration of Judah into the global economy of the Assyrian Empire.

Had such guidelines been applied from the outset of the modern biblical-historical enterprise, we would not have wasted a century on futile research.

## ON ARCHAEOLOGY, BIBLICAL HISTORY, AND BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

*Amihai Mazar*

The aim of these essays is to examine some of the currently debated issues pertaining to the relationship between the Hebrew Bible, archaeology, and recent historical reconstructions of the history of ancient Israel. For example, to what extent can the biblical narratives on the early history of Israel be utilized in writing a history of early Israel? Are they historically reliable or are they national sagas created with little or no historical basis, centuries later than the assumed historical time of the events that they describe? Such questions have been raised by scholars for the entire biblical narrative; from the Patriarchal stories, to Israel's slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the Conquest, the period of the Judges and, more recently, the time of the first three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon. Even the period of the divided monarchy is debated. When did Israel and Judah emerge as states? What did the historical and cultural developments of these states look like?

Questions have also been raised concerning the history of Israel's religion. When did Israelite belief in Yahweh as one god emerge? Was the belief in this particular god identical with the emergence of monotheism? Such subjects, and many related ones, have been central turning points in biblical-historical scholarship as well as topics of immense interest to the general public for over a century and a half. Over the course of a generation, we have seen a new wave of debate among scholars worldwide concerning these issues. This has been followed by a growing interest on the part of the public and the media. In the more recent stages of this debate, archaeology has been playing an ever-increasing role. The opportunity to present these essays are but another expression of the increased interest in these subjects in which the main question to be addressed is to what extent archaeology can contribute to the resolution of the issues at hand.

The branch of archaeology that relates to the Hebrew Bible has been traditionally coined "biblical archaeology." Yet, this term has become increasingly

problematic. Is it a legitimate designation, or, as some would pose the question, is it the aim of archaeology to “excavate” the Bible? Can this aspect of archaeology be better defined as an independent branch of scholarship? If we continue to use this term, how should we qualify it? Let us first examine very briefly the two components of the term, namely, “archaeology” and “Bible.”

#### ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology is one of the fields of research that emerged during the nineteenth century, and during the twentieth century it developed into a mature, full-blown social-scientific discipline with its own research methods and theoretical frameworks. The goal of modern archaeology is to study various aspects of past societies by reconstructing spatial and temporal social changes as well as a wide range of economic, technological, political, and religious phenomena. Archaeological research is undertaken internationally using a variety of methods developed for fieldwork and for the accurate processing and interpretation of recovered data. The scope of this field of research is wide scale and relates to every aspect of human activity that can be recovered by the spade. The questions asked and the answers given are sometimes complicated and often interpretations of the same body of archaeological phenomena may differ and thereby become the subjects for extended scholarly debate.

The first task of the archaeologist is to locate ancient settlement sites. The study of the spatial distribution of sites over time is essential for reconstructing transformations in settlement patterns, for establishing hierarchic relationships between types of settlements, for evaluating the settlement areas in the various periods, and for estimating the resultant demographic changes over time. This is achieved through the use of field surveys combined with the study of ancient geographic, ecological, and environmental factors. Modern research tools like the computerized Geographical Information System (GIS) help in analyzing the settlement map in relation to the topography, geology, soil types, land uses, water resources, ancient roads, and so on. When such studies are combined with the results of excavations at various sites, archaeologists can reconstruct an integrated picture of the ancient settlement system. Detailed settlement maps, tables, and graphs enable them to follow changes in settlement and demography through time in a given region and to gather information about such topics as the response of human societies to environmental challenges. As we will see, this aspect of the archaeological endeavor is essential for the study of the emergence or origin of early Israel.

In the land of Israel, this aspect of ancient settlement is closely related to the research field known as the historical geography of the Bible, an independent area of research that can be defined as part of the broader field of

biblical archaeology. Its goal is to explore the vast geographical data in the Bible and in other ancient written sources such as Egyptian and Assyrian texts, as well as epigraphic documents from the southern Levant. The identification of place-names preserved in written sources with actual archaeological sites was the first major achievement of this field following the exploration of the Holy Land by various pioneers over the centuries. I have in mind such notable figures as Eusebius, the head of the Christian church of Caesarea during the fourth century C.E., Ashtori Haparchi, the Jewish scholar who lived at Beth-shean in the fourteenth century, and nineteenth century scholars like the noted American Edward Robinson who, in 1838 and 1852, carried out the first extensive pioneering exploration of the country in modern times.

All these scholars were aware of the remarkable preservation of ancient biblical names in the place-names of their own times and in particular, in the Arabic names used throughout the region. Some examples include Beth-shean (Arabic Beisan), Bethel (Arabic Beitin), Shiloh (Arabic Sailun), Gibeon (Arabic Jib), and so forth. Historical geography also deals with many other aspects of ancient geography, such as biblical lists of tribal plots and tribal borders, administrative divisions like those of the kingdom of Solomon, political and cultural boundaries, road systems, and much more. Thus, the combined efforts of field surveys and analytical historical geography enables the archaeologist to draw important conclusions regarding the ancient settlement systems and demography in the Holy Land and to relate various ancient texts to the available geographical and archaeological realia.

Archeological excavations explore the inner structures and developments of various types of settlements over time—from small hamlets of desert dwellers to well-planned, fortified cities. The larger sites of the ancient Near East are buried in ancient mounds, which are commonly known as “tells.” These sites were located in the most suitable locations for human habitation and were settled and resettled over hundreds or even thousands of years, and thus they often preserve dozens of occupation levels, which archaeologists refer to as “strata.” The exploration of a single tell or mound might require long-term and large-scale planned projects that may take several years to complete and even then only small, randomly selected areas can be excavated. In many cases, only the uppermost occupation levels can easily be approached, while deeper levels can only be examined in deep probes or in step trenches along slopes of mounds, and thus remain largely unknown. Furthermore, each excavator has to address what might seem to be an endless number of questions regarding his or her site. What were the environmental resources, such as water and land, available to the site? When exactly was the site settled? Was the population of the site stable or were there population changes or fluctuations? How many occupation phases do the various “strata” reflect and can we define gaps

in the occupation? Which part of the site was settled in each period? What reasons brought an end to each occupation phase? What was the town plan in each of those occupation periods? What were the building materials and techniques used? What kind of subsistence strategy was employed in each settlement period? If there were violent destructions—who or what caused them? Can we relate such destructions to historical events known from other sources? These are only a few of the many questions that the archaeologist might ask.

Reliable answers to such questions can be achieved only by methodical, well-controlled excavation methods and a thorough understanding of many phenomena and features in each excavation. The decipherment of depositional processes and the stratigraphy of a site are the most challenging tasks of the field archaeologist. The depositional processes are the result of diverse and sometimes unexpected human decisions and activities of a distant past. The image of a tell as a cake composed of horizontal layers (or “strata”) that can be peeled off, one by one, by the archaeologist was a common one in the early stages of research, but the reality proved to be much more complicated. The correct understanding and documentation of complex, multilayered sites both mentioned in the Bible and archaeologically attested, such as Hazor, Megiddo, Beth-shean, Lachish, as well as many others, are absolutely crucial to an accurate interpretation of Israel’s early history.

Less complex, yet no less informative, are many other types of sites reflective of human activity, such as isolated farms, hamlets, citadels, agricultural and industrial installations, cemeteries, ancient roads, and ports. Many of these sites have been recovered by chance during salvage operations related to intense development in modern times, and others have been explored within the framework of more formalized research projects. Desert archaeology and underwater archaeology are two specialized branches of archaeological investigation. Both contribute unique types of data to the archaeological enterprise. For example, cultic sites in the deserts of Sinai and the Negev have informed us immensely about the origin of the biblical “standing stones” or *masseboth*. The Phoenician merchant shipwrecks discovered just a few years ago at great depths below the surface of the Mediterranean Sea have provided us with our first archaeological encounter with an actual Phoenician ship that probably looked like the Tyrian ship described in Ezek 27.

The combined evidence from these diverse sites provides archaeologists with a panoramic view of various modes of human life. In my career over the past thirty years, I have excavated two multilayered medium-sized towns (Tell Qasile and Tel Batash [Timnah]), two multilayered major cities (Beth-shean and Tel Rehov), as well as a series of smaller, single-period sites: an early-Israelite village settlement, a citadel, a watchtower, a cultic site, and a desert farm



or road station. Each of these sites had a different story to tell about ancient Israel's material culture, society, and life ways.

Returning to the excavation process itself, the finds that archaeologists typically recover include pottery vessels, various artifacts made of metal, stone, bone, and other materials, seals, inscriptions, art objects, and cult objects of various kinds, burial remains and funerary goods, and, in rare cases, we may also find organic materials like wood and textile items. Detailed study of these objects is essential for defining temporal and spatial changes in the material culture. We can define regional cultures as well as study the origins and diffusion of cultural features. We can detect foreign influences, local and international trade networks, processes of colonization, and immigration. Such detailed research provides the basis not only for relative dating, but, together with the aid of firmly dated objects, for absolute dating and chronology.

There are many examples of the successful results of such meticulous studies in biblical archaeology. For example, the study of the Philistine culture as a culture of immigrant peoples became possible only thanks to precise analysis of pottery and other artifacts and comparative study with artifacts from Greece and Cyprus. Moreover, the identification of what is thought to be Israelite material culture in the period of the Judges became possible only with the meticulous comparison of that cultural data with the Canaanite culture known from the lowlands.

Another important aspect of modern archaeology is the wide-scale cooperation with scientists from various fields such as botany, zoology, physical anthropology, geology, geomorphology, chemistry, physics, geography, metallurgy, computer science, statistics, remote sensing, and more. This kind of cooperation has opened many new horizons of research as exemplified by recent published studies. By way of example, in the summer of 2005 at Tel Rehov, we uncovered the remains of several beehives from the tenth century B.C.E., the only ones so far discovered from any site in our region. After we suggested the identification of the hives, a scientist from the Weizmann Institute analyzed their clay walls and indeed identified the remains as beeswax residue.

The use of radiometric dating, that is, measuring the isotope  $^{14}\text{C}$  in organic materials, particularly in seeds, has become a very important tool for dating. For example, at Tel Rehov, we managed to gain a precise series of dates from seeds spanning the twelfth to ninth centuries B.C.E., which have become an important factor in the current debate over Iron Age chronology.

Archaeological projects require much technical work, including drafting and drawing of architectural plans and artifacts, spread photography, restoration, and conservation of objects and structures. Wide use of computer software is needed in order to handle ever-growing databases, to process

quantitative analyses of various kinds, to help in creating typological serializations, and to create three-dimensional images, just to mention a few of the applications now used in field archaeology.

The collection, processing, integration, interpretation, and publication of these numerous data are not simple tasks, and the integration of finds from various individual sites into a comprehensive regional picture can be compared to the assembling of a huge jigsaw puzzle. It is a complex and expensive enterprise. As an excavation director, I imagine myself sometimes standing in the center of a huge intersection, surrounded by radiating branches of study and research. And although archaeological fieldwork has its glamor and great moments of discovery, the daily routine involves lengthy, tiring stages of documentation, processing of finds, integrating results, and preparing final publications. The actual work of the archaeologist extends well beyond the popular image of Indiana Jones, the treasure hunter.

A higher level of the archaeological enterprise is that of interpretation, synthesis, and explanation. This so-called armchair stage of archaeology deals with the reconstruction of the broader aspects of social, political, economic, and ethnic changes in a given region or country. The subjects of research and interpretation cover all aspects of life, several of which I mentioned above: the human response to the environment; agricultural and industrial technologies; demography; comparative studies of architecture and domestic artifacts; warfare; daily life, including diet, cooking, baking, spinning, and weaving, as well as metallurgy; religious practices and beliefs; art; iconography and symbolism; paleography; transportation and trade; and burial customs. This is only a partial list of the many subjects that constitute human activity. The goal is to reconstruct as much as possible a complete portrait of ancient society, from the life of the poorest peasant to that of the king or priest.

As such, various questions emerge as to the modes of life within the society explored. Were the people nomadic, semi-nomadic, or sedentary? Were they ranked or egalitarian? Was it a tribal society with family lineage as a major component? Archaeologists try to reconstruct the emergence of social and political systems such as states and empires in order to understand colonization, immigration, assimilation, and symbiosis of different groups. The ancient economy is reconstructed by studying modes of agricultural and industrial production, ancient technologies and evidence for short- and long-range trade systems. Gender archaeology attempts to study the roles of women in society; religious beliefs and cult practices are reconstructed on the basis of temples, cult objects, and burial practices; cognitive aspects of life that may be deduced from the finds are also addressed in modern research. Most of these subjects concern long-term social and technological changes. Yet, in many cases we can detect certain events, typically those that are the more

dramatic or crisis-oriented events for ancient peoples like earthquakes and military conquests. Such events, though tragic for an ancient population, are rewarding for the archaeologist who excavates them, since they “freeze” certain moments in the life of a society and can yield abundant finds. Examples from my own experience are the destruction layers dated to the Iron II period, which I excavated at three sites, Tel Rehov, Beth-shean, and Timnah (Tel Batash). These could be attributed to certain Aramean, Assyrian, and Babylonian military conquests between the ninth and late-seventh centuries B.C.E. The specific evidence for such conquests is thick, burnt conflagration layers in which whole households were buried. Such “time capsules” enabled my team to reconstruct rather extensively the material culture of a certain site during a particular time period.

A variety of theoretical frameworks have been developed over the past few decades in archaeological interpretation. One of the best-known trends is the so-called processualist archaeology or “New Archaeology,” which dominated scholarship from the 1960s to the 1980s. This approach emphasized ecological and environmental determinism and gave less weight to human decisions and actions. Since the early 1990s, post-modern modes of thinking have inspired archaeological interpretation; “post-processualist” archaeology, as it is known today, has opened the door for much more varied and flexible interpretation; various possible explanations for the same archaeological phenomena are acceptable, and the role of human decisions and of the individual in history is taken into consideration more than in the previous period. These trends have direct implications on our subject. They can, for example, offer alternative solutions to the debate over the historicity of David and Solomon.

In sum, archaeology is a much more complex discipline than most people think. Its methods of analytical research and deduction provide the only way to reconstruct an outline of historical periods and lost cultures where there are no written records, while for periods where we have written sources, archaeology gains significant importance as a complementary tool for historical reconstruction, even counter-balancing texts that may be biased or loaded with propaganda and ideology.

Because it is the Holy Land, the land of Israel has continuously been the focus of archaeological research from the beginning of the modern era. In the nineteenth century, it suffered from the infancy of the new discipline. In fact, early archaeologists inflicted much damage on sites like Jerusalem in the early years, that is, prior to World War I. Yet in those years, pioneers like Sir Flinders Petrie developed new concepts and methods that laid the foundation for later advances in research. Between the two world wars, American and European expeditions conducted large-scale excavations at major sites and laid the foundation for the systematic archaeological research of the Holy

Land. These were the years when the concept of biblical archaeology took shape under the leadership of the American scholar William F. Albright. His unique personality and wide-ranging knowledge of all aspects of ancient Near Eastern studies inspired a whole generation of scholars; among them are some of the founders of biblical archaeology in Israel, like Benjamin Mazar and Yigael Yadin. This school strived for the integration of archaeology with biblical history, historical geography, paleography, Near Eastern history, philology, and art history into a comprehensive field of knowledge.

After 1948, archaeology in Israel and Jordan developed rapidly. The large-scale excavations at Hazor led by Yadin served as the training ground for a new generation of Israeli archaeologists, who later developed their own projects and methods of research. American, European, Australian, Japanese, and Jordanian teams have continued exploration in Israel and Jordan, and now these countries have become some of the most intensively and dynamically explored in the entire world. But how can this vast amount of ever-accumulating data serve to reconstruct biblical history? To this question, we now turn.

#### ON THE HISTORICITY OF THE BIBLE

As mentioned previously, our concern in these essays is mainly the questions, to what extent can we extract history from the biblical text? and, what are the methodological problems involved in relating archaeological research to the study of biblical history? After all, the title of the colloquium from which this volume derives was “Digging for Truth.” But can we discover the absolute truth for our field? My answer is “yes” concerning certain matters, but I have serious doubts regarding many others.

A wide spectrum of views exists concerning the process and stages of writing and redaction of the Hebrew Bible, and the evaluation of the biblical text in reconstructing a history of Israel. In particular, the biblical stories from the times of the Patriarchs to the kingships of David and Solomon are the subjects of serious debates. There are those who accept the biblical narrative as true history; they are mostly scholars or authors of religious backgrounds, either Jewish or Christian, who believe in the truth of the Bible and are not ready to give up the biblical stories either as the Word of God or at least as straightforward true history writing. A recent example is the six-hundred-page book by Kenneth Kitchen *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, in which the author vigorously defends the historicity of the details of the Bible using extensive material from the ancient Near East. His concluding sentence is:

The Old Testament comes out remarkably well, so long as its writings and writers are treated fairly and evenhandedly, in line with independent data.

On the other side of the spectrum stand scholars who all but negate the historicity of the entire Hebrew Bible and claim that it was written during the fourth to third centuries B.C.E. as total fiction, reflecting *in toto*, the intellectual and theological world of the much later writers. Philip Davies, for example, defines biblical Israel as a modern invention of scholars. Niels Peter Lemche, one of the main authors in this group writes,

the Israelite nation as explained by the biblical writers has little in the way of a historical background. It is a highly ideological construct created by ancient scholars of Jewish tradition in order to legitimize their own religious community and its religio-political claims on land and religious exclusivity. (*The Israelites in History and Tradition* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 165–66.)

This group of scholars has been dubbed “revisionist,” “minimalist,” or even “nihilist,” though they themselves decline any common general term for their school or “movement” so to speak. In between these two extremes there is wide space for various views that may collectively be defined as “middle-of-the-road” or moderate. Professor Finkelstein and I stand at two different points on the centrist continuum. Our views differ on certain important issues, but we share more in common than we do with either of the two extreme groups described above.

An archaeologist like me, who is an outsider to textual research, must make a choice between divergent views when trying to relate archaeological data and interpretation to the biblical sources. My own choice is to follow those who claim that the initial writing of the Torah (the Pentateuch or Tetrateuch), of the Deuteronomistic History and large parts of the prophetic and wisdom literature took place during the late monarchy (eighth to early-sixth centuries B.C.E.), while during the exilic and post-exilic periods they underwent further stages of editing, expansion, and change. Yet, I also accept the view of many scholars that the late-monarchic authors utilized earlier materials and sources. These may include:

1. The archives of the Jerusalem Temple library.
2. Palace archives (though the existence of such archives remains disputed).
3. Public commemorative inscriptions, perhaps centuries old (no Israelite ones have been preserved, but potential analogues include those of Mesha of Moab and Hazael of Damascus, two of Israel’s major opponents in the ninth century).
4. The oral transmission of ancient poetry. This may include the Song of Miriam, the Song of Deborah, the Blessings of Jacob, and other ancient poetic texts.

5. Folk stories and aetiological stories rooted in a remote historical past. These include many of the stories in the biblical literature, such as portions of the Exodus and Conquest accounts, stories about the deeds of the Judges, the biographies of Saul, David, and Solomon, the Elijah and Elisha cycles, and so on.
6. Earlier historiographic writings that are referred to in the Hebrew Bible as the “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel” and the “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel” cited in the books of Kings:

Now the rest of the acts of Ahab: and all that he did, and the ivory house which he built, and all the cities that he built, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel? (1 Kgs 2:39; NRSV).

This sounds as if the author had in front of him some earlier form of written history.

It is generally accepted that many of the stories incorporated in the Deuteronomistic History, though based on folk stories and traditions, were reworked under the influence of late-Judean (that is, southern) theology, ideology, and editorial processes. Nevertheless, such stories may retain valuable historical information that can be accessed with the help of accepted historical methods coupled with external written sources and archaeological finds. As modern interpreters, our task is to extract any reliable historical information embedded in these literary texts, using archaeology as a tool of control and heightened objectivity.

Both Assyrian inscriptions and local inscriptions like the stelae of Mesha, king of Moab, and of Hazael, king of Damascus (better known as the Tel Dan inscription), confirm that the general historical framework of the Deuteronomistic narrative relating to the ninth century was based on reliable knowledge of the historical outline of that century. Our understanding of the periods *preceding* the ninth century is of course foggier. Israel is not mentioned in any external source following its lone reference in the inscription of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah, which dates to 1206 B.C.E., that is, until we come to the mid- to late-ninth-century Mesha inscription 350 years or so later.

I imagine the historical perspective in the Hebrew Bible as a telescope looking back in time: the farther in time we go back, the more dim the picture becomes. Considering that the supposed telescope stood somewhere in the late-eighth or seventh centuries B.C.E., it gives us a more accurate picture when we look at the ninth century than when we view the tenth century, and so forth. Oral traditions and stories embedded in the biblical historiography might preserve more extensive authentic details concerning events or phe-

nomena closer to the time of writing, while the farther away we get from the supposed events, the stories become more imaginative and symbolic, and are perhaps accompanied by greater distortion of earlier information. We also have to recall selective memory and memory loss, censorship, and biases due to ideological, theological, personal, or other motivations. This is true with any history, even of the last century, not just ancient history. Allow me to cite a well known example from the history of Israel's 1948 War of Independence. There is the official history, produced by the Department of History in the Israel Defense Forces, and there are various other versions, among them post-modern narratives that deconstruct various aspects of the official history of this war. When dealing with a period long past and with almost no direct written sources, like the early biblical period, it is extremely difficult to assess the biblical data and so one may ask whether it is possible at all to write an accurate history of early Israel.

In spite of these dangers, the working hypothesis of the view that I represent is that information in the Deuteronomistic History and other biblical texts may have historical value, in spite of the distortions, exaggerations, theological disposition, and literary creativity of the biblical authors and editors.

#### THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE DEFINITION OF "BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY"

The correlation of archaeological finds and texts is only one aspect of the archaeologist's work—perhaps one of the most difficult—yet it is a challenge that must be faced. In light of the conflicting views concerning early biblical history, archaeology can provide external, presumably objective, data on realia related to the issues currently under debate. It also has the potential to provide independent judgment of biblical sources by allowing us to examine in certain cases their historical reliability. In addition, it provides numerous observations on many aspects of early-Israelite society that cannot be extracted from the biblical text itself.

However, the interpretation of archaeological data and its association with the biblical text may in many cases be a matter of subjective judgment, since it is often inspired by the scholar's personal values, beliefs, ideology, and attitude toward the text or an artifact. In many cases, when archaeological discoveries are utilized in order to prove one historical paradigm or another, we are confronted with arguments that are, at their core, circular. This was true for William F. Albright and his followers, and is still true today, and thus it should be recalled that many archaeological conclusions are not certifiably factual, no matter when or by whom they were proposed.

Despite this, the role of archaeology as an invaluable tool for examining various aspects of biblical historiography and of the early periods of Israelite history—the Late Bronze through the Iron age—remains firmly intact. Investigations have shown that there are both many correlations between archaeology and biblical references, as well as many contradictions. This situation is only natural in light of the Bible's complex process of transmission described above.

But the role of archaeology is well beyond confirming or denying certain biblical events or other references. Archaeology is in fact the main tool for reconstructing many aspects of Israelite society, economy, daily life, and religion, as well as those of Israel's neighbors. It offers a unique perspective on the Israelites as part of the wider context of the Levant and the entire ancient Near East.

Nevertheless, after more than 150 years of research in this field, there are still debates and discussions concerning the definition of biblical archaeology as a concept and field of research. During the last generation, the term received some bad publicity. It was considered by many as a field of study loaded with theological and ideological agendas, reflecting the religious beliefs of Christianity or Judaism. We often hear that biblical archaeology's main goal is "to prove the Bible" so to speak. William G. Dever preached for many years that we needed to redefine our field of research as "Syro-Palestinian Archaeology," thus relocating it in the wider context of Near Eastern archaeology, unrelated to biblical studies. A few years ago, the American Schools of Oriental Research, a nondenominational academic organization, decided after a long debate to change the name of its popular magazine, *Biblical Archaeologist*, to *Near Eastern Archaeology*. The change reflected the desire of American archaeologists working in our field to liberate the discipline from any religious framework.

At the background of this change stood the dichotomy between American archaeologists of our region who are faculty members of theological seminaries, divinity schools, or departments of biblical, Jewish, or religious studies, and those in the forefront of American archaeological theory and practice who hold appointments in departments of anthropology and history. In America, the term biblical archaeology continues to be used by conservative Christian researchers, as evidenced in a new book entitled *The Future of Biblical Archaeology* (edited by J. K. Hoffmeier and A. Millard), which appeared in 2004. Similarly, the Biblical Archaeology Society and its magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review*, though private and nondenominational, reflect in their names a well-defined targeted public, much of it composed of conservative Christians who are interested in the Bible and its world. There is a broad gap between this approach and the professional approach to archaeology as part of the larger fields of anthropology and history, and this has resulted in the



refutation of the term biblical archaeology by many scholars in the United States. Strangely enough, Dever himself calls now for a return to the old term and proposes that we just add the qualifying word “New”—this “New Biblical Archeology” remains the same old woman, but wearing the new dress of current archaeological methodology and more “anthropological” ways of thinking.

In Israel, the term biblical archaeology has been accepted in a more simplistic way as a means of referring to all archaeological activity related to the Bible and its world. In my view, the term biblical archaeology should continue to be used as a generic or broad term, defining all aspects of archaeological research that are related to the world of the Bible. This is a broad definition that includes vast geographical regions from Iran to Greece and from Turkey to Egypt, that is, the entire Middle East and eastern Mediterranean. The archaeology of each of these regions contributes in some degree to our understanding of the biblical world, and as such it contributes to biblical archaeology. According to this definition, biblical archaeology is not an independent scientific discipline, but rather the “shopping cart” that collects data from the various branches of Near Eastern archaeology and utilizes them in studying the Bible in its world.

Though written in what was at the time one of the smallest and most negligible states of the ancient Near East, the Bible is perhaps the most profound product of the ancient Near Eastern world. Many of the achievements of this cultural world, rooted in the third, second, and first millennia B.C.E. are embedded in it. Many ancient local memories can be identified in the biblical text; some of them even seem to be pre-Israelite and adapted by the Israelites as part of their heritage. Archaeology may provide us with a clue to such cases. In this wider framework, the archaeology of the land of Israel has a central role in providing the most direct access to the society that created the biblical text.

Such a “Bible-centered” orientation is criticized by various kinds of scholars: on the one hand there are the “minimalists” who would not accept the Bible as related to the Iron Age, and on the other hand there are the archaeologists who claim that archaeology should be treated as a self-contained discipline and that professional archaeologists should not intervene in the study of biblical history or culture. Yet, to me and many others it appears that removing the connection between archaeology and the Bible would strip our field from its flesh and leave just the dry bones. The relationship between the text and the artifact is the essence of biblical archaeology; it remains for us to cope with the questions that are raised, avoiding on the one hand a naive and fundamentalist approach to the text and, on the other, any excessively manipulative, uncritical, or imaginative interpretations.