

## The key role of Biblical Archaeology in Exegesis: An interview with Professor Israel Finkelstein

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“If the historical faith of Israel is not founded in history, such a faith is erroneous, and therefore, our faith is also.” So wrote Father Roland de Vaux, the French Dominican archaeologist who excavated Qumran and was the first editor-in-chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These words were written in the last century, when there were not so many excavations in Israel as there are today.

What we see today is that many, but not all, of these excavations demonstrate that text and spade can and do point in different directions. If archaeology, therefore, is allowed to tell its own story some parts of biblical history will require rethinking, particularly when it come to some well-known biblical figures and even events. This is the inevitable result when there is juxtaposing of the biblical record and archaeological data. It does not signify the end of faith. It can only mean that mature faith will be needed.

This is the approach of Professor Israel Finkelstein, of Tel Aviv University, a prominent Israeli archaeologist, and co-author of the book *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of its Sacred Texts*. He believes that what the spade uncovers should do not do away with the sense of tradition because the Bible is our spiritual legacy. Neither a ‘minimalist’ nor a ‘maximalist’, Finkelstein stays in the middle and is the proponent of Low Chronology. According to him, this system --- lowering the 11<sup>th</sup>-century assemblages to the early-to-mid 10th-century --- solves the problem with the traditional Levantine chronology.

Following are excerpts of an interview with him:

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**You have said that radiocarbon dates of organic material found in excavations will give a verdict on archaeology. Do you rely mostly on carbon dating?**

My chronology relies mostly on radiocarbon dating because it is the only method which provides an external system independent of textual materials, the historicity of which may be debated.

**You are also on record saying that we have to sort history from non-history. It is also true that every text is biased, as you also stated. So is it archaeology that can help decide what is historically accurate and what is non-history, making a clear distinction between fact and myth?**

For the proto-historical period, history is constructed solely through archaeology. For historical periods, archaeology can help in a significant way, but I don't think it can give a final verdict. Archaeology also has its problems, including methodological issues. So, if we take biblical history as an example archaeology can help tremendously because, unlike the texts, which in certain cases describe events that ostensibly took place centuries before the actual compilation, it provides real-time evidence.

**What made the Israelites emerge as a distinct group in Canaan? Was it monotheism?**

No, because monotheism came later. We cannot speak about monotheism even in the year 586 BCE, the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. The religion of Judah at that time can be described as monolatry, which means that there was a deity who was more important than the others, so the existence of other deities was not denied. Monotheism, in the way we understand it, is the product of the Persian, and more so, the Hellenistic, period.

**But the New Testament tells us that even during the time of Jesus, people were worshipping other gods. He accused some Israelites of worshipping Baal.**

I think monotheism came relatively late. In the beginning the Israelites were part of the mosaic of people in the Levant, with their demographic and cultural roots in ancient Canaan. Then, gradually, they began to develop differently, because of territorial and political reasons. This includes religion and cult. I suppose that we can speak about full-fledged monotheism in the Hasmonean era.

**You have written that the “only disadvantage of the Low Chronology --- at least for some --- is that it pulls the carpet from under the biblical image of a great Solomonic United Monarchy and puts the spotlight on the Northern Kingdom of the Omride Dynasty as the first real prosperous state of early Israel. Here is the dilemma: How can one diminish the structure of the ‘good guys’ and let the ‘bad guys’ prevail?”**

Was Omri the ‘bad guy’ because he is said to have promoted Baal worship, referred to in 1 Kings: 23-25 as the “worthless idols”? Verses 11-7 of the same book also tell us that “Solomon built a high place for the Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon.” According to

**the Bible, both Solomon and Omri did evil. To take the point further, studies have demonstrated that Solomon's Temple was built after the model of the Syro-Hittite Ain Dara temple, dated to 1300 BC, and dedicated to Ishtar or Baal.**

You are right. People read the biblical text selectively, without paying attention to the many layers found in it. David had many faults and Solomon led a sinful lifestyle, according to chapter 11 of 1 Kings. Yet, they ruled over a sort of Golden Age, an age of territorial expansion and economic and cultural prosperity. This includes the construction of the Temple. Omri and Ahab are described as villains, and they were kings of the Northern Kingdom, despised and rejected by the author of Kings. Hence it was easier for many to affiliate with the founders of the Davidic Dynasty, ignore the anti-North sentiment in the text and fail to see the Northern Kingdom as described by contemporary monarchs --- one of the two most important powers in the Levant of their time.

**The Merneptah Stele was the most important find of Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, and that was in 1896, and it continues to be very important, in fact it is a bone of contention in biblical archaeology till today. The stele provides little information about the Israel it refers to. What is your point of view?**

The Merneptah Stele refers to a group of people named Israel, who lived in Canaan in the very late 13<sup>th</sup> century, that is, close to the year 1200 BCE. Yet, it does not provide us with real information about the size of this group and its location. Some scholars have placed it in Transjordan and others have located it in the highlands west of the Jordan. The big question is how this group developed later and gave its name to the kingdom of Israel, meaning the Northern Kingdom, which emerged in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, that is, *ca.* 250 years after the Merneptah campaign. With no relevant texts for the two and half centuries between Merneptah's campaign and the rise of the Northern Kingdom, this can be answered only by archaeology, in the sense that the Merneptah Israel should be sought among the groups that settled in the highlands west and east of the Jordan starting in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. These groups later created the territorial kingdoms of the Iron Age, among them Israel.



**Professor Israel Finkelstein**

Photograph by Louis C. de Figueiredo

**What can you now say about Khirbet Qeiyafa, another archaeological site that has raised controversy? Together with Dr. Alexander Fantalkin you had correctly pointed out that a finding can reverse the course of research and save the literal reading of the biblical text from critical scrutiny, an approach that was then traced to Professor William F. Albright's assault on Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis.**

Yes, conservative interpretation of the finds at Khirbet Qeiyafa is a revival of Albright's approach, according to which archaeology can prove critical research to be wrong and support a literal reading of the biblical text. Khirbet Qeiyafa is a highly interesting site, and unique in many ways. But many interpretations of the finds are possible. The layout of the site indicates a highland origin of the inhabitants, however it does not necessarily point to the expansion of early Judah to the Shephelah. Many of the finds hint at a north highlands link to the site. In other words, I think that the finds there shed light on early, 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE north Israelite territorial formation, rather than Judah in the days of the formation of the Davidic Dynasty.

**Why has so much importance been given to the ostrakon found at the site when ostraca cannot be compared to monumental inscriptions and papyri? Another problem is that the text is incomplete and there are no preceding or succeeding verses. Father Émile Puech, the co-editor-in-chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls, who is also an expert in some ancient Near Eastern languages, not only published his translation in *Revue Biblique* but also interpreted the verses as referring to the establishment of an Israelite monarchy. Both of you are world-class experts in your respective fields, he in epigraphy, you in archaeology. What can you say as an archaeologist?**

The majority of scholars cannot read a clear text in this inscription, and I am one of them. As far as I can judge, this inscription should be evaluated as one of a group of Proto-Canaanite inscriptions known from the Shephelah and the southern coastal plain of that time.

**Do you think that there was no possibility of Israelites escaping from the control of the Egyptians under Ramesses II, crossing the desert to enter Canaan? Josephus cited Manetho's history associating the Hyksos with the Israelites. Of course, the problem is that scholars today think that Manetho was mistaken.**

Manetho had already known about the Exodus tradition, so I doubt whether his work can help solve the riddle of Exodus. As far as I can judge, the Exodus traditions represent an accumulation of traditions and memories, from different periods. The old core could have been the expulsion of Canaanites from the Nile Delta in the 16<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but there are other, later layers in the story. For instance, the geographical description of the Delta, as it appears in the text, represents the knowledge of authors in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, which was the Saite period in Egypt. On the other hand, the Exodus tradition already appears in the eighth-century BCE prophecies of Hosea and Amos. All this demonstrates how complex this issue is.

**Professor Donald Redford is of the opinion that the early Israelites were a group among the Shasu Bedouin of southern Canaan and there are texts that refer to a deity, "Yhw in the land of Shasu", and this deity is also attested in Egyptian texts in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. Would the deity be a part of the pantheon you mentioned and only came to be accepted as the one, true God after 586 BC? Professor D. N. Freedman wrote an interesting paper where he dwelt on religious progression, from henotheism to monolatry and then monotheism.**

I agree with Redford. The Shasu and Apiru groups were among those that settled in the highlands in Iron Age I, following the collapse of Bronze Age Canaan and the withdrawal of Egypt from the Levant. In this sense, at least some of the early Israelites were what the Egyptians described as Shasu and Apiru. Others were probably farmers who were uprooted and withdrew from the turmoil in the lowlands and resettled in the hill country.

On the subject of YHWH, the deity does indeed appear relatively early in connection with the south. In this regard I note the reference to YHWH of Teman, that is, YHWH of the south, in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Kuntilet Ajrud inscriptions. Interestingly, this site, though located in the southeastern Sinai, is culturally and geo-politically affiliated with the Northern Kingdom, rather than Judah. Indeed, other inscriptions there refer to YHWH of Samaria, the capital of the North. The question is when and how was YHWH incorporated into the two Hebrew kingdoms and what was his role in the early days. Note that the Hebrew kings in both the North and the South carry Yahwistic names starting in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

**What can be said about Hazor today, so many years after the excavations led by Yigael Yadin, who dated the destruction to circa 1225 BC? Can it confirm Joshua's conquest as described in the Bible (Joshua: 11:10)? The excavations have uncovered several Egyptian statues, with heads and arms chopped off. There are scholars who say that the conquest as described in the Bible was not a factual account of historical events.**

The conquest in the Book of Joshua is a "conquest to be", that is, an ideological construct that advances the Deuteronomistic ideology of Josianic times. It is not an historical account. The fall of the Canaanite urban centers was a long process, which lasted a century and a half or so, from the demise of Hazor sometime in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the destruction of places such as Lachish and Megiddo, not earlier than ca. 1130 BCE. This is clear from both extra-biblical historical records and archaeology, including radiocarbon dating. So Hazor was in fact destroyed as part of the stormy events in the entire eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Bronze Age. If one accepts that at least some of the groups involved in this process later settled in the highlands, there is a sort of link between Hazor and early Israel. But, again, there was no marching Israelite army under one leader. Finally, there is the question of why the Bible refers to Hazor as "once the head of all those kingdoms" (Joshua 11: 10). Is this the memory of the situation in the Bronze Age? I prefer to interpret this verse as an etiology, that is, a story based on the phenomenon of the big ruins of Bronze Age Hazor, which were known to the Israelites in later centuries.

**Would you say that archaeologists today are more careful and are able to insist on evidence that they see in the ground? As serious and honest an archaeologist and scholar as Yigael Yadin had a problem after excavating Masada. He is reported to have known that the Romans sacrificed pigs at burials and pig bones were indeed found with human remains at the site. Of the twenty-five skeletons found there, just one was laid out in burial fashion. It does seem that Josephus' account (*The Jewish War*, 389-406) was used as a guide, viewed *a priori* as historically accurate, an example of text dominating the field operation.**

I will talk about biblical archaeology in general instead of dealing with Masada. In the past, literal reading of the biblical text dominated and in many ways even dictated the interpretation of the finds. In a way, the textual evidence predominated over archaeology, which was used as little more than decoration, not sufficiently consulted. Therefore, at least in certain cases, biblical archaeology lagged behind methods employed in world archaeology and historical interpretation.

The situation today is more complex. Though there are still "pockets" of this traditional and conservative biblical archaeology, many field researchers have thrown off the shackles; they do not allow themselves to be guided by a simplistic, literal reading of the biblical text and now give their finds their proper role in the overall interpretation of the past.

**Which goes to say that some texts have to be ascribed to a period later than what Wellhausen proposed?**

As far as I can judge, the earliest written text in the Hebrew Bible should be ascribed to the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This does not of course exclude the possibility that earlier traditions and memories are embedded in them. The peak "projection" of

biblical texts took place in Judah of late monarchic times and after the destruction of Jerusalem, perhaps mainly in Babylon. The latest texts in the codex represent realities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

**Do you agree with Professor Jan Assmann about cultural memory?**

Yes, I agree with Jan Assmann about cultural memory. He made a great contribution in this field. My understanding of the development of the Exodus question is very much influenced by his ideas.

**But are there distortions in this cultural memory?**

Any memory that is being transmitted over centuries absorbs the realities of the periods involved. In this sense it is not possible for such a memory to go through these periods unchanged. This is why I think that the word “accumulative” should be added in certain cases to the idea of cultural memory.

**Does that mean that you believe that Professor Assmann is the scholar who comes closest to connecting the dots? Professor James Hoffmeier has disagreed with him on some points. He believes that the Exodus is plausible and also that Akhenaten was the first monotheist, but by placing Moses in the Egyptian court he is inevitably led to the renowned Egyptologist and also to Freud. If that is the approach it is like saying that there was a direct connection between Moses and the controversial pharaoh's Atenism and the purpose of an exodus can be questioned.**

I do not share Hoffmeier's views and I am certainly closer to Assmann on this matter. I am in favour of reading different layers in the Exodus traditions, some transmitted orally and then written down, other layers representing later stages of compilation. The entire process, from the possible earliest tradition or memory to the latest reality embedded in the text, took centuries.

**Yes, I get your point, however it raises a problem. Such views can create doubts in the minds of some scholars. In a recent article Professor Thomas Thompson of the Copenhagen School maintains that both Professor William Dever and you have not really distanced yourselves from the kind of archaeology conducted by Professor William F. Albright. You are neither a 'minimalist' nor a 'maximalist' and have avoided the two extremes.**

Indeed, I see myself as representing the “view from the centre”, what the French Assyriologist Jean-Marie Durand very cleverly described as “positive deconstruction”. Minimalists like Professor Thompson see no value in the Hebrew Bible for reconstructing the history of Iron Age Israel and Judah. This is because they date the texts to the Persian and Hellenistic periods. The Hebrew Bible is layered and contains materials which shed light on the history of the Hebrew kingdoms and I see no reason to ignore it. Ironically, this too can be supported by archaeology, for instance, when we look at the lists of towns such as the ones in Joshua, chapter 15. In other words, archaeology plays a “positivist” role here. Needless to say, biblical texts should be studied critically, with a good grasp of modern biblical exegesis and texts of the Ancient Near East.

**You are excavating in Megiddo and have said that it is a laboratory for new methods to conduct archaeology. Can you explain further?**

In the last few years my team and I have made Megiddo a laboratory for implementing existing methods in micro-archaeology and developing new techniques. I refer to the contribution of the exact and life sciences to archaeology and historical reconstruction. The archaeological record is divided into two: macro-archaeology: that is, what can be seen by the naked eye, as for example, walls, pottery vessels, metal objects; and micro-archaeology, that is, the record, which cannot be seen with the naked eye. Today we understand that working without the latter does not allow establishing a full picture of the past. So we are now advancing at Megiddo studies in fields such as tracing molecular residues in ancient pottery vessels, which can teach us about commodities shipped in these vessels, ancient DNA and the like. We also advance dating methods in the sense that we use our very impressive bank of radiocarbon results in order to make progress in other physics-related “clocks” such as paleomagnetism. Indeed, a few years ago we convened an international colloquium at Megiddo under the title “Setting the Clocks at Armageddon”...

**Is there a possibility of micro-archaeology clashing with carbon dating when the results are examined?**

The only possible clash with radiocarbon dating can come from other physics-related “clocks”. At present, --- and I suppose that this will be so in the foreseeable future --- radiocarbon dating has better accuracy, that is, lesser uncertainty, than other available methods such as paleomagnetism and optical stimulated luminescence. That is why our set of C14 dates from Megiddo can help advance these methods.

**Do you think that your discoveries can undermine faith, Jewish and Christian faith?**

No, I don't think there is any connection. I deal with archaeology, history, historicity and historiography, and strongly believe that there should be a clear distinction between theology, ideology and of course the faith of people on the one hand and scholarly studies on the other.