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Rethinking Israel

*Studies in the History and Archaeology
of Ancient Israel
in Honor of
Israel Finkelstein*

edited by

ODED LIPSCHITS, YUVAL GADOT, and MATTHEW J. ADAMS

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Looking Back on the Bible Unearthed

Neil Asher Silberman

University of Massachusetts Amherst

More than fifteen years have passed since *The Bible Unearthed* (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001) was published, and it is my great pleasure on this occasion both to express my admiration for the work of my cherished friend and colleague and to offer some personal observations about the trends that have emerged in the archaeology of ancient Israel in these last fifteen years.

Today, despite a few voices of scholarly and polemical editorial protest (e.g., Kitchen 2003, Hazony 2004) and premature proclamations of the “death” of the Low Chronology (Garfinkel 2011), hardly any mainstream archaeologist working in Israel believes that there was a single massive Exodus from Egypt; that Joshua led a coordinated lightning military campaign to conquer Canaan for the tribes of Israel; or that the First Book of Kings did not wildly exaggerate the military might, administrative sophistication, and sheer grandeur of the Davidic and Solomonic reigns. Though there is now a wide spectrum of opinion on specific critiques of biblical historicity, *The Bible Unearthed* was among the first archaeology-based books written for general readers that problematized rather than merely illustrated the biblical narrative. That problematization—asking questions rather than materially verifying the scriptural accounts—was bound to raise the hackles of those for whom the divine inspiration of the Bible was and is an article of faith. Indeed, for the last century and a half, from the 1863 heresy tribunal against Bishop Colenso (Larsen 1997) to the 1925 Scopes “Monkey Trial” (Larson 2008), to the ongoing fundamentalist crusade in America to teach Creationism in the public schools (McCalla 2006), one’s opinion about the historical reliability of scripture is regularly seen as a litmus test for one’s contemporary politico-religious identity.

The historicity of the Hebrew Bible is, after all, much more than a debate over archaeological fact and interpretation; it is a core component of certain theological systems and modern territorial claims. The supreme authority of the Bible, expressed in the phrase *sola scriptura*, became a battle cry of the Reformation (Pelikan et al. 1996), and as Satta has shown, the belief in the inerrancy of the Bible became an increasingly central tenet of Evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century (Satta 2015). Significantly, the two most influential figures in American Biblical Archaeology, William F. Albright and G. Ernest Wright, both stressed the relevance of their work to their Christian faith (Albright 1957, Wright 1952). Common to all of these traditions of respect for the historicity of the Hebrew Bible was an unshakable belief in the divine promise to David (2 Sam 7), which served as a genealogical basis for the messiahship of Jesus Christ (e.g., Strauss 1995). Judaism, too, had a long tradition of veneration for King David, yet over the centuries, the

diversity of midrashic interpretations of the tumultuous events of his life and the meaning of his messianic destiny was so wide—and so intensely debated (Diamond 2008)—that few Jewish religious authorities focused explicitly on their historicity. David's capital, Jerusalem, was a diasporic object of yearning (Reif 1997), and the biblical figure of Solomon became an embodiment of wisdom and majesty for Jews and Christians alike (Bose 1996). Needless to say, these longstanding theological traditions would not be easily overturned by a modern archaeological assertion that God's promise to David—and indeed the entire scriptural narrative of David's reign and that of his temple-building son and successor Solomon—were relatively late, complex, and ideologically loaded myths (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006a).

So how did *The Bible Unearthed* come to be written? We had quite different professional perspectives on biblical archaeology: I had spent my career as an observer and sometime critic of the field, writing about the history of archaeology in the "Holy Land," trying to show how the evolution of archaeological understandings of biblical history was not only the result of the steady accumulation of data. I was fascinated by how the zeitgeist, ideologies, hopes, and worries of every era also deeply influenced the interpretations of every era's archaeologists (Silberman 1982, 1989, 1994). Israel was the prototypical field archaeologist, who had, or so it seemed to me, a quite different intellectual approach. He believed in the primacy and objectivity of empirical data, great quantities of which he collected, analyzed, and interpreted in his highland surveys and wide-ranging digs. For him, the predisposition—the ideological bias—of many contemporary archaeologists to assume that the Bible narrative was a reliable historical source and that their main challenge was to illustrate that narrative in ever greater detail, was an impediment to the advancement of the field. I saw ideology as inherent in any historiographical endeavor; he saw empiricism as the key to overcoming it. Yet we both shared an eagerness to confront and unsettle the comfortable conventional wisdom, replacing outmoded historical understandings with new hypotheses. And I have to say that working with Israel was an always exciting collaboration, in which our different perspectives worked together in surprisingly creative ways.

The challenge of archaeology was (and is) to analyze material evidence of ancient social structure, lifeways, and economic exchange and let the chips fall where they may. And in Israel's early fieldwork, the chips fell in some very interesting places: his analysis of the surveys of the hill country—the first conducted after the 1967 war—revolutionized the archaeological understanding of the Israelite settlement in Canaan not as a coordinated military invasion but as a collective change in settlement patterns and subsistence strategies (Finkelstein 1988). That understanding sharply diverged from the existing archaeological consensus in which the destruction layers dividing Bronze from Iron Age levels at sites throughout the country were commonly ascribed to Joshua's military campaigns (e.g., Yadin 1972). But this was only the beginning of Israel's archaeological challenges to biblical historicity. I can clearly remember the clickety-clack of my dot matrix printer printing out on perforated computer paper an early draft of his new Low Chronology, which he had sent to me by email. That Low Chronology (Finkelstein 1999) had far-reaching

consequences in suggesting that the impressive city gates at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer so long adduced as amazing proof of Solomon's building activities described in 1 Kgs 9:15 (Yigael Yadin 1960) were not Solomonic at all (Finkelstein 1996).

This was the starting point for the development of an intriguing, alternative narrative of the history of ancient Israel, which eventually became the alternative narrative of *The Bible Unearthed*. Of course, there had been earlier critics of the "unified conquest" of Canaan (most prominent among them Mendenhall (1973), Gottwald (1980), and the more general deconstructionism of the so-called Copenhagen School (e.g., Whitelam 1997, Lemche 1998, Thompson 2000), but none of them had either sought or analyzed the flood of new archaeological data that had been collected in the highlands of the West Bank by a new generation of Israeli archaeologists. And from the standpoint of environmental data, complexity of settlement patterns, urban sophistication, and use of literacy as a tool of a centralized administration, it became clear that the polity that arose in the area described in the Bible as the northern Kingdom of Israel was not a late and sinful breakaway from the United Monarchy of David, Solomon, and Rehoboam, but a prosperous and powerful regional power that would have economically and militarily dominated Judah until the Assyrian conquest of Israel in the late 8th century BCE (Finkelstein 1999). And here is where the theological underpinnings of the biblical narrative could be seen for what they were: a crisis-inspired nationalist reading of history, transmitted from the conquered north and creatively adopted by the still-independent kingdom of Judah. It retrospectively proclaimed its capital Jerusalem, and the Davidic Dynasty that ruled it for centuries had been chosen by God for a great destiny (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006b). Thus, Israel's archaeological interpretations merged with my focus on the ideology of historiography to shape a new vision of the Bible's mythic view of the past.

We have been gratified by the positive reaction that *The Bible Unearthed* and its successor volume, *David and Solomon* (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006a), have received over the years. But it is important, I think, to keep the revisionism of these books in perspective—not as some radical effort to undermine faith in the Bible but simply as the way that contemporary archaeology works in all parts of the world. The periodic renewal of paradigms as the result of new data and new social concerns is a healthy and normal scholarly phenomenon. Just as the traditional catastrophic view of the "barbarian invasions" of the Roman Empire has been replaced by a far more nuanced understanding (Wells 2001); the "Pirenne Thesis" about the independent development of Dark Age Europe has been contradicted (Hodges and Whitehouse 1983); and even the long-held ethnic migrationist theories in the Western Hemisphere have been replaced by very different archaeological approaches (Hofman et al. 2014), *The Bible Unearthed* is an expression of a similar paradigm change. It is based on a methodology of material-culture study that builds its hypotheses from patterns and trajectories of human behavior—rather than merely materially illustrating master narratives.

Unfortunately, some of the strongest reactions to *The Bible Unearthed* have failed to recognize this tension between text and material culture; they still adamantly

believe that biblical archaeology is a zero-sum game. The polemical use made of the book by opponents of organized religion (e.g., Hitchens 2007: 102) and by various critics of the State of Israel (e.g., Conrad 2003) as support for their contemporary political positions mistakenly assumes that the biblical narrative is worthless if it is not historical. Much more egregious, however, was the religious critique. For those whose personal faith was tightly bound to the belief that the Bible's story of ancient Israel was historically accurate, if not inerrant, any challenge to the Bible's veracity—archaeological or otherwise—was seen as a form of modern-day heresy. And enforcers of orthodoxy often see variant ideas as subversive conspiracies. "The book is ideologically driven and should be treated that way by anyone who reads it," wrote one early reviewer of *The Bible Unearthed* (Hess 2001: 127). Ideologically driven? What is meant by that phrase? Is an adamant insistence on biblical historicity not itself ideologically-driven?

No less flimsy has been the attempt to discredit *The Bible Unearthed* from within contemporary Israeli public discourse, where belief in the historicity of the "United Monarchy" and in particular David's establishment of Israel's eternal capital has become a token of national commemoration and private faith (Schmemmann 1995). The political implications of this rhetorical battle have been lost on few (Wallace 2006). The ideas expressed in *The Bible Unearthed*—and Israel's ongoing work and publications—have become a convenient target for those who have been singularly unsuccessful in reconciling their unquestioning faith in the Bible with the kind of historical skepticism and creative hypothesis-building that contemporary archaeology requires. Thus, we have had some dubious discoveries and extravagant archaeological claims about the discovery of "David's Palace" in Jerusalem (e.g., Erlanger 2005) and a bombastically definitive verdict from the recent excavations at the site of Khirbet Qeiyafa that the attempt to question the historicity of a Davidic kingdom was dead (Garfinkel 2011). Archaeology is usually much more effective in dealing with large-scale change than particular personalities. But the imaginative inclination of the excavators of Khirbet Qeiyafa to point out a specific structure within the fortified complex and unequivocally assert that "[t]here is no question that the ruler of the city sat here, and when King David came to visit the hills he slept here" (Hasson 2013).

Today, more than fifteen years after the publication of *The Bible Unearthed*, there are two uneasily coexisting varieties of archaeology in Israel dealing with biblical history (Silberman 2007). One has an absolute faith in the historicity of the Bible, particularly regarding David and Solomon, expecting that conclusive evidence of their reigns will eventually be (or already has been!) found. The other seeks to analyze Iron Age material culture and environmental data to formulate an ever-deepening understanding of the relationship between the empirical evidence and the biblical narrative. It was our hope that *The Bible Unearthed* would adequately represent the latter and inform general readers that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between excavated sites and artifacts and events described in the biblical text. For like an ancient mound that invites excavation, the Bible is not a seamless chronicle but rather a complex stratigraphy of stories, each of which—like

archaeology itself—expresses a particular era’s vision of history and spiritual ideals. *The Bible Unearthed* was only a beginning; there is no doubt that even more compelling reinterpretations lie ahead.

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