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RECONSTRUCTING DAVID AND SOLOMON: METHOD AND MEANING

Introduction

Some of us grew up in the generation of Marshal McLuhan and the axiom that the medium was the message. Often in the present generation of Middle Eastern (or Syro-Palestinian) archaeologists, the method is the message in relating the archaeological data to the biblical record. My former colleague here at NOBTS and Israel travel partner for several tours of Israel in the late 80s and early 90s used to remind me occasionally about an old adage about archaeology, while I was lecturing on the archaeology of a given site on location in Israel. “Archaeology is the science of digging a hole, and the art of spinning a yarn, after all archaeologists just dig up peoples garbage and leftovers.”

The current debate concerning the authenticity of the Biblical historical accounts of the Davidic–Solomonic kingdom in the tenth century B.C. is simply the latest chapter in the century and a half old controversy concerning the historical context and reliability of the Bible. In the beginning critical scholars dissected and fragmented the Pentateuch and the stories of the Patriarchs into supposed sources which originated centuries after their purported characters were to have existed. These stories, some of which were acknowledge to have origins in the second millennium B.C., were retrojected from the first millennium into the second in order to compose a cogent “historical background” for the later period events. Patriarchal accounts in the Pentateuch in general were treated as aetiological myths, created to provide foundation and explanation of later developments

in the history of Israel in the late exilic and post-exilic periods. Then the challenge came concerning the Exodus, the conquest narratives of Numbers and Joshua, and then the period of the Judges. The tenth century was simply the next segment of history subject to this “enlightened” historiographic methodology, and the application has continued into the assessment of the Iron II – Divided Kingdom period..

ASSESSING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL DATA

Lest I be accused of minimalizing the minimalists and other detractors from the historical reliability of the biblical record, let me say that a number of archaeological excavations have raised some significant concerns regarding our attempts at correlating the biblical and archaeological data bases. We have little to directly correlate Genesis 1–11 with the archaeology of the periods preceding the Intermediate or Middle Bronze Ages where most biblical archaeologists place the patriarchs. We have numerous problems associated with the Exodus and the Conquest related to the Israelite presence in the land of Goshen in the eastern Nile delta region, the location of the miraculous crossing of the Sea, the location of Mt. Sinai,¹ and many of the sites mentioned in the conquest narrative of Joshua 1–12.

Yet gradually inroads have been made in some of these problematic areas. James Hoffmeier, an Egyptologist formerly at Wheaton and now at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has outlined extensive evidence from Egyptian texts and monuments, as well as

¹Note the revived attempts recently to locate Mt. Sinai in N. Arabia. See, previously proposed by Martin Noth and others. See *The Mountain of God: The Discovery of the Real Mt. Sinai*, by Robert Cornuke and David Halbrook (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

from some recent geomorphological evidence, that correlates well with the biblical evidence concerning the Israelite sojourn in Egypt and the crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea. In his trend-setting book, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, he includes linguistic and literary evidence concerning the plagues in Egypt and the toponymics (derivation of place names) of the Israelite journey from Egypt which provide ample background for the contextualization of the biblical record in the Late Bronze Age (New Kingdom/Empire period) Egypt (1550–1200 B.C.).² This evidence stands contra that being proffered by writers such as N.P. Lemche and T. Thompson³ who would suggest the biblical record as we have it is the etiological creation of Israelite writers of seven to ten centuries later. Regarding the perceived activity of the biblical writers, Lemche has stated his case clearly and succinctly in a *BAR* article which recounted a dialogue between the two University of Copenhagen professors Lemche and Thompson and two American professors William Dever (Univ. of Arizona, Steven Ortiz’s mentor) and Kyle McCarter (Johns Hopkins Univ.): “What this means is that he [the Biblical writer] was not really writing history. He was making it up. He didn’t know the genre of history writing. Antiquity simply did not know that genre. That’s a modern genre. That means there are traditions; the tradents (creators and carriers of a tradition) were creating mythologies. It has nothing to do with history.”⁴

²J.K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (New York: Oxford, 1996).

³T. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (London: Random House/Basic Books, 1999), 161–225.

⁴H. Shanks, “Face to Face: Biblical Minimalists Meet Their Challengers,” *BAR* 23.4 (1997), 26–42,66.

Noteworthy in the life of Thomas Thompson, one of the leaders of the Copenhagen school, is his self-described pilgrimage through the “historical” data. Thompson began his pilgrimage into the new historiographic methodology during his dissertation work on the historicity of the patriarchal narratives while a Ph.D. student at the University of Tübingen in 1967–1971. He started out developing a thesis that the patriarchal narratives were historical, but he soon became convinced that the opposite was true since the theories of Amorite migrations and Nuzi parallels were being invalidated by his contemporary researchers. He perceived that these parallels between the Bible and the Ancient Near Eastern literature “had been a thinly veiled fabrication, a product of wish-fulfillment. An entire social world had been created which had never existed.”⁵

Israel at the Crossroads in the Ancient Near East

Geographically, economically, and politically Israel lay at the crossroads of the Ancient Near East between Egypt to the Southwest, the Hittites to the far North during the Bronze Ages and the seafaring Phoenicians during the Iron Ages, and then the great empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia to the Northeast and East. Except for the brief period of the “glory days” (herein in question) of David and Solomon, lasting for maybe fifty to seventy years, the nation was either in turmoil internally (i.e., civil war between Asa and Ba’asha) or subject to the Aramaeans, Assyrians, Babylonians, or Persians. Thus for only intermittent brief periods of prosperity did the nation have the opportunity to develop the material culture that archaeologists could uncover and give evidence of a

⁵Thompson, *The Mythic Past*, xii.

substantial civilization. Therefore, arguments suggesting the nonexistence of something from the Israelite history or the inaccuracy of the Biblical record are often based upon silence.

Except for the Dead Sea Scrolls which date to a much later period (200 B.C. -- 68 A.D.), a corpus of literature comparable to the tens of thousands of documents found in Egypt and Mesopotamia of the Bronze and Iron Ages has never been unearthed.⁶ The only real possibility might be in Jerusalem whose scant 10th century remains have already been noted. What remains there might have been of the royal palaces of David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, or Josiah, which might have in turn contained substantial epigraphic material, were likely either destroyed in the Babylonian destruction or removed by the Temple court expansions of the Hasmoneans and later the radical reshaping of the area in the massive Herodian construction projects. Instead what we have are small collections of ostraca (carbon ink inscribed potsherds) from places like Arad, Lachish, and Samaria, or bullae and signet rings from Jerusalem or Samaria.⁷ And then there is the occasional stele, usually erected by a foreign king such as the Egyptians Seti I or Ramses II, or the Aramaean king Hazael, the probable author of the famous stele from Tel Dan. This unique archaeological discovery has proved the first extra-biblical evidence

⁶I.e., the 25,000 clay tablets of Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh or more recently the discoveries in the 1970s of 15,000 tablets at Ebla and the 1000-2000 of Emar on the Euphrates. Note two articles in the September 1995 volume of *Biblical Archaeologist* on the finds from Tel Emar in "Emar, Capital of Aštata in the Fourteenth Century BCE," by Jean-Claude Margueron (126–138) and Daniel Fleming's "More Help from Syria: Introducing Emar to Biblical Study" (138–147).

⁷Note the recent article examining the signet ring of Abdi, from the administration of Israel's king Hoshea (732-722 BC), "Royal Signature—Name of Israel's Last King Surfaces in Private Collection," *BAR* 21.6 (1995), 48–52.

from the Iron Ages for the existence of the Davidic dynasty.

The Dan Stele provides us with an intriguing piece of “historical” evidence (See the facsimile on the following page.). Note the following translation of the text, from Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh:

L1 [...] and cut [...]
L2 [...my father went up [against him when] he fought at [...]
L3 And my father lay down, he went to his [ancestors] (*viz.* became sick and died).
And the king of I[s-]
L4 rael entered previously in my father’s land. [And] Hadad made me king.
L5 And Hadad went in front of me, [and] I departed from [the] seven[...-]
L6 s of my kingdom, and I slew [seve]nty kin[gs], who harnessed thou[sands of cha’]
L7 riots and thousands of horsemen (or: horses). [I killed Jeho]ram son of [Ahab]
L8 king of Israel, and [I] killed [Ahaz]iah son of [Jehoram kin-]
L9 g of the House of David. And I set [their town into ruins and turned]
L10 their land into [desolation ...]
L11 other [... And Jehu ru-]
L12 led over Is[rael ... And I laid]
L13 siege upon [...]

From the context provided in Lines 7–9, the author of the stele, would have been the usurper Hazael, the Aramaean king anointed by Elisha to reign after Ben-Hadad, whom Hazael assassinated (2 Kgs 8:7–15). Assuming the above reconstruction is right, Hazael claims to have assassinated the northern Israelite king Jehoram, son of Ahab, and the Judahite king Ahaziah, son of Jehoram (different king, same name). Hazael’s claim to have killed Jehoram (or Joram) and Ahaziah evidences the typical exaggerated claims of ANE kings’ concerning their victories when compared with the statements in 2 Kgs. 8:28–29 and 9:14–26. In the biblical text, Jehoram is described as having been seriously wounded by the Aramaean army, but that later he died as a result of an arrow

Text

- | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|----------|--------|----------|-----------|--------|------|-------|-------|----|----|----|
| [| וגזר] | [| מרע] |]. | 1. | | | | | | |
| [| אבי יסק] | [| עלוה בה] | תלחמה בא- |]. | 2. | | | | | |
| וישכב | אבי יהך | אל] | אבהו] | ה ויעל | מלכין] | ש] | 3. | | | | |
| ראל | קדם בארק | אבין] | יהמלך | הדר] | אנית] |]. | 4. | | | | |
| אנה | ויהך | הדר | קדמין] | ר אפק | מן | שבע] | ת.--- |]. | 5. | | |
| ימלכי | ואקתל | מל] | כן | שב] | ען | אסרי | אנלפי | ר] |]. | 6. | |
| כב | ואלפי | פרש | קתלת | אית | יהו] | רס | בר] | אחאב |]. | 7. | |
| מלך | ישראל | וקתל] | ת | אית | אחז] | יהו | בר] | יהורס | מ] |]. | 8. |
| ך | ביתדוד | ואשם | אית | קרית | הם | חרבת | ואהפך | א] |]. | 9. | |
| ית | ארק | הם | לנישמן |] |]. | 10. | | | | | |
| אחרן | ולה- |] | ויהוא | מ] |]. | 11. | | | | | |
| לך | על | ישנראל | ואשם |]. |]. | 12. | | | | | |
| מצר | על] |]. |]. |]. |]. | 13. | | | | | |

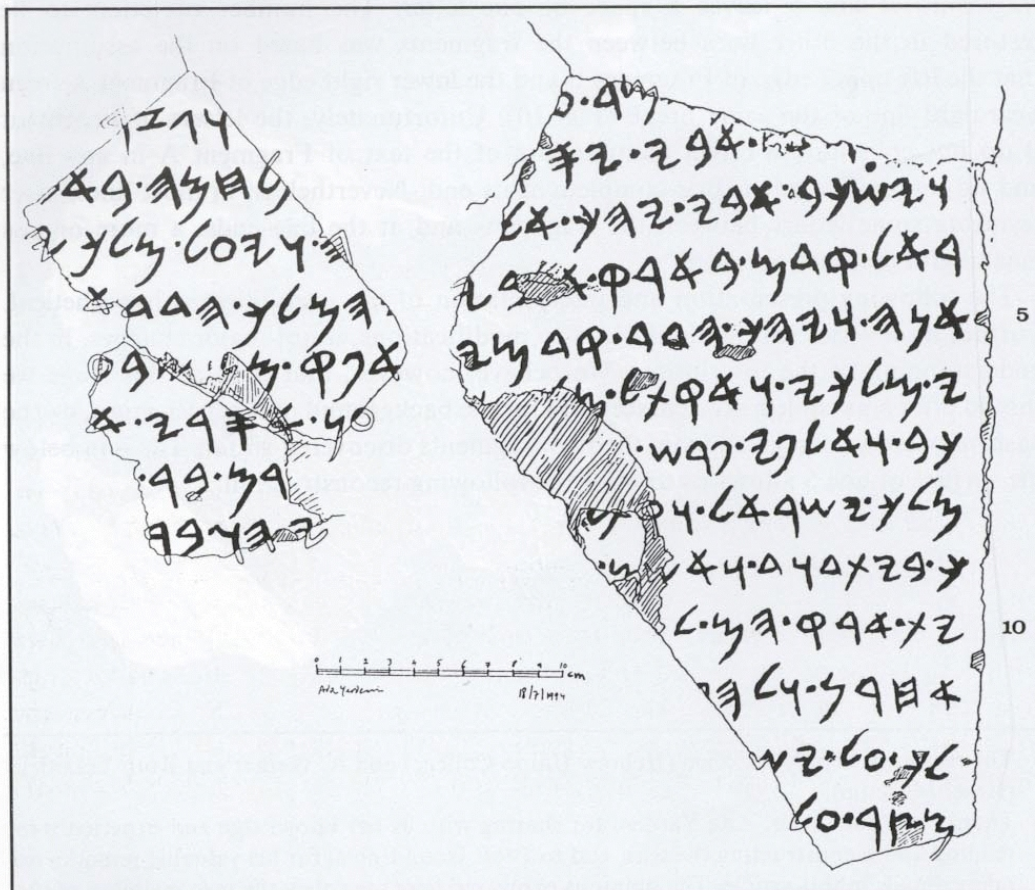


Fig. 10. Fascimile of the inscription on Fragments A and B (drawn by Ada Yardeni).

Fig. 9. Fragment A (right) and B (left). Fragment B is composed of B1 and B2.

through the heart fired by Jehu, the purger of the Omri–Ahab dynasty. Likewise, Ahaziah died at Megiddo after being wounded by Jehu’s archers (2 Kgs.9:27–28).

Thompson, along with Philip R. Davies and others, takes the Tel Dan inscription reading *bytdwd* as a reference to a “temple of *Dwd*,” with the name *Dwd* to be rendered perhaps as Dud or Dod. He also suggests the possibilities that the two separate fragments may belong to two different stelae or that the text may be a forgery.⁸ Only a small minority of scholars have supported this assessment. For Thompson the biblical stories of the early Israelite kings are mere heroic tales retrojected from two or more centuries later into a time when the state of Judah did not exist. He presents a history of Palestine, for which he states: “there is no room for an historical United Monarchy, or for such kings as those presented in the biblical stories of Saul, David, and Solomon. The early period in which the traditions have set their narratives is an imaginary world of long ago The stories of the golden age of the United Monarchy reflect the fantasy and ambitions of Jerusalem of the Maccabees.”⁹ Yet he states firmly that he is not a skeptic but only a realist.

Thompson’s line of reasoning is exemplary of hyperbolic negative conclusion based upon lack of evidence in the present, a theoretical extrapolation from silence. One thing that should have been learned from the field of archaeology long ago is that the lack of evidence in the present should not lead one to posit the non-existence in the past of some record or tradition from the extant literary corpus, like the Bible. Two hundred years

⁸Thompson, *The Mythic Past*, 204-05.

⁹*Ibid*, 206–07.

of archaeology have barely scratched the surface of its potential findings.

A noteworthy inclusion in the same volume of *BAR* as the minimalists debate was an article assessing the paucity of evidence concerning tenth century B.C. Jerusalem by archaeological historian Nadav Na'aman. In "Cow Town or Royal Capital? Evidence **for** Iron Age Jerusalem," Na'aman discusses the issues as to why so little of early Israelite Jerusalem remains for the archaeologists to uncover, and yet concludes from correlating Biblical data with the small amount of archaeological evidence and Ancient Near Eastern literary parallels that "There is therefore nothing impossible about the main outlines of the Biblical account of David's conquest . . . [or] the extent of David's kingdom, even applying modern concepts of political control."¹⁰

Almost thirty years ago, Edwin Yamauchi of the University of Miami of Ohio made the following optimistic estimate of the percentage of the totality of the potential archaeological material that has been excavated and published. First, less than 10% of the original material of any site in any given stratum remains for the archaeologists to someday excavate. Second, less than 20% of the available sites have been surveyed extensively. Somewhat noteworthy here is that in the regional surface surveys done in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s nearly quadrupled the number of sites known in the Holy Land compared to those known prior to the Israel War of Independence. On top of that the public and private construction projects in the burgeoning industry of Israel continually uncover remains which need salvage operations performed by the Israel Antiquities Authority to assess the potential value of those materials. Third, only a small fraction of

¹⁰N. Na'aman. In "Cow Town or Royal Capital? Evidence **for** Iron Age Jerusalem," *BAR* 23.4 (1997), 67.

the potential sites have been excavated to any significant degree, probably in the neighborhood of 5%, and of those the most any site has been excavated is about 30%, and those being small short-lived sites such as Khirbet Qumran (Dead Sea Scroll site) or Masada. The average percentage of any given site which has been excavated is more on the order of 5% or less. Fourth, the fraction of the material which has been excavated that in turn has been published (this is the dark side of archaeological history which is just now in process of being remedied) is less than 10%. When correlated and multiplied together, these optimistic figures give us a grand total of an infinitesimal .0025 % of the potential data in the ground that has been made available for public assessment.¹¹ In some cases there has been much ado about little, broad sweeping generalizations made from a paucity of evidence.

ASSESSING AND INTERPRETING THE BIBLICAL DATA

Defining and Delimiting “Israel’s Glory”

Minimally, the Bible should be accorded the same status and assessed by the same historiographic methodology as the thousands of Ancient Near Eastern texts which have been unearthed since the late 18th century. For the evangelical Christian the Hebrew Scriptures represent much more, but we should be careful in our reading of the Bible not to exaggerate or misrepresent its internal evidence. Many of us come to the text as heirs of a Sunday School tradition in which Solomon was portrayed as the richest man in

¹¹E. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lipincott, 1972), 146–57.

history, the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua was total and complete, and Jericho was such a large city that its walls were wide enough for two chariots to be driven side by side.¹² Interestingly, some critical scholars began their study of the Scriptures under such tutelage, and carry these taught traditions into their later critique of the Bible, thereby creating straw men which can easily be consumed by their argumentation. In numerous lectures I have attended over the past ten years devoted to the debate concerning the emergence of Israel in the land of Canaan, conquest models which were labeled as “biblical” and which were neither biblical nor realistic from a military sense, were subjected to searing scrutiny. Israel’s might or glory at its peak was not in her military capability, her magnificent palaces or Temple, or her skillful craftsmanship. Her glory was in her God and in her unique relationship to Him as defined by the various covenants.

The Bible and Recent Archaeology

Recent publication of archaeological finds continue to supply the corroborative data to the biblical record and to provide new insights to the larger Ancient Near Eastern world of the Bible’s setting. One must be careful in not assigning the task of “proving the Bible” to archaeology, for it cannot establish the essentials of the faith or say anything about the God of the Bible. One of the key themes of the Old Testament is the focus on the worship of Yahweh God of Israel and its correlative polemic against idolatry. When documents were discovered in recent decades which confirmed Israel’s problematic

¹²This latter example was used by a professor in a chapel sermon when I first started teaching here, confusing the later Greek tradition concerning the walls of Babylon with that of Old Testament Jericho.

history of worshipping other gods, some scholars were surprised that the archaeological record revealed that the Israelite practice of religion was so thoroughly syncretistic that Yahweh was viewed as having a female consort in Asherah and that zoomorphic figurines were utilized in the worship of her God.¹³ They were somehow unable to distinguish between the prophetic ideal and the practical religion of the people and their leaders.

The translation of the Emar tablets have provided new insights into the Bronze Age world of the patriarchs down to the time of Moses. The decipherment of a number of the 1000–2000 clay tablets uncovered at Tel Meskene, situated on the Euphrates River between Mari and Carchemish in northern Syria, from the region which was the original homeland of the biblical patriarchs, Aram Naharaim.¹⁴ Source critical scholars traditionally have placed the development of the Israelite festival calendar in the post-exilic priestly school,¹⁵ and yet from Emar has come a parallel calendar with a seven-day fall festival beginning on the 15th of the month, like the biblical Sukkoth (Booths). In the history of Emar the drain on the royal economy forced them to change from an annual festival to one occurring every seven years. The anointing of the priests with blood and oil at Emar parallels that of the Aaronic priestly consecration described in Exodus 28–29, Leviticus 8, and Numbers 8. Such practices were thus not unusual in the time of Moses,

¹³Note the inscriptions from Kuntillet `Ajrud and Khirbet e-Qom which contained phraseology such as “I adjure you by Yahweh of Shomron (Samaria) and his Asherah (or asherah)” or references to “Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah.” For a brief summary of the finds see “Kuntillet `Ajrud” by Ze’ev Meshel in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, 310-12.

¹⁴Note the Bible’s references to Aram Naharaim, where Abraham sends Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24) and to Paddan Aram where Jacob flees from Esau (Gen 29).

¹⁵I.e., R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 484–93.

Aaron, and Joshua, but were in fact practiced by distant Semitic cousins to the Israelites in the Late Bronze Age.

CONCLUSION

The fields of Bible and archaeology have and will remain separate but interactive disciplines which demand that their scholars be thorough and diligent in the pursuit of the truth. The Bible can inform archaeology of the Bronze Age through the Early Roman periods in portions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean world, and archaeology can provide supplemental contextual background for the world of the Bible, aiding in the proper interpretation. Occasionally the data will intersect precisely providing the community of faith additional assurance that the Bible is a thoroughly reliable authority for faith and practice.