

Deconstructing David:  
Current Trends in Biblical and Archaeological Studies

Dr. Steven M. Ortiz  
Assistant Professor of Archaeology  
Biblical Studies Division

Respondents: Dr. Dennis Cole  
Dr. Robert Stewart

INTRODUCTION

The biblical account of the life of David has always fascinated a wide spectrum of individuals: from biblical scholars to Hollywood producers, artists and sculptors. The emphasis on the Kingdom of David and Solomon has not escaped Biblical Archaeologists as we have focused our attention on identifying and associating archaeological discoveries with the United Monarchy of Israel.

Recent trends in biblical studies are now focusing on the historicity of the Davidic Dynasty. There are two schools within this trend. The first, as evidenced by the writings of Lemche, Thompson, and Davis, questions whether there is any historicity in the biblical accounts. In regards to David and Solomon, they conclude that the events describing Israel's development of the Monarchy are created to provide the Jewish

people with a “glorious past.” This group has been labeled as the “Copenhagen School,” Nihilist, and Minimalist.<sup>1</sup>

The second group consists of those scholars who attempt to analyze the biblical narrative and separate historical events from latter tradition. The assumption is that the biblical writers had an agenda when recounting the events associated with the rise of the United Monarchy. Some have viewed it as the natural outcome of the desire to place the Monarchy in a positive light, while others conclude that the writers attempted to deceive their audience by distorting any negative event regarding the monarchy. Three major scholarly publications marketed for a popular audience have been published within the past year: *David: A Biography*, (Steven McKenzie, Oxford 2000), *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Baruch Halpern, Eerdmans 2001), and *The Bible Unearthed* (Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, Free Press 2002). These recent publications provide an unflattering view of the biblical account of David and represent the influence of minimalist trends within biblical studies.<sup>2</sup> There appears to be a new trend to popularize these critical views of the historicity of the rise of the Monarchy. These issues are no longer discussed among a small isolated group of scholars, but are becoming the dominant paradigm in the public arena. Anyone who teaches or preaches from the Bible will encounter this trend and must be able to offer a response and defense of the historicity of the biblical narratives.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It appears that ‘Minimalist’ has become the best term, possibly by default—it will be the term used here.

<sup>2</sup> They conclude that the Bible provides the pro-David spin while they are presenting the anti-David spin. As Clinton's foes and friends each present a different picture of the Monica affair, the same can be said about the Bathsheba affair.

<sup>3</sup> This issue was addressed by Dr. Jimmy Draper in a recent chapel at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (March 28, 2001).

The goal of this proposal is to present an overview of the major tenets and issues of the debate and provide a critique of these trends based on the archaeological data. The first half of this paper will present the current trends, a review of previous research, and the three current issues in regards to the historicity of David. A review of the birth of biblical archaeology in relation to the archaeology of David and Solomon and the evolution of paradigm shifts in Syro-Palestinian archaeology will be provided. There will be an emphasis on the influence of the “Minimalist School,” commonly called the *Revisionist School*, on current archaeological research of the Iron Age. Specifically, the recent *Low Chronology* proposal of Israel Finkelstein to redate strata associated with the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

The second half will demonstrate the weaknesses of the critical arguments using archaeological data. An underlying theoretical paradigm of the paper will focus on rephrasing the question to address the evidence for state development in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

It will be demonstrated that the archaeological record shows evidence for state development in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE and contradicts the redating proposed by the *Low Chronology*. Hence, these recent trends of denying the historicity of David do not have any support from the archaeological record. In fact, there is ample evidence for the historicity of the United Monarchy.

## ARCHAEOLOGY-HISTORY OF RESEARCH

### **Albright/Yadin**

The Albright model has been the dominant paradigm in biblical archaeology. The *Archaeology of David and Solomon* is a central feature of this foundational paradigm. William F. Albright, considered to be the father of biblical archaeology, developed the current ceramic stratigraphy of Syro-Palestine. Based on his excavations of Tell Beit Mirsim, he associated the sudden appearance of red-slip burnished pottery with the United Monarchy.

Yadin was the Israeli counterpart to Albright. He excavated Hazor, which was the Israeli training dig for the first generation of Israeli archaeologists. Yadin noted that the gate system at Megiddo and at Hazor were very similar. Recalling the text of 1 Kings 9:17-19 (Solomon's Building projects), he associated the gate systems with a common architect, and hence, a central authority. Yadin went back to Megiddo and Hazor and isolated monumental features that he associated with Solomon, notably Palace 6000 and 1723 at Megiddo. He also went to the old McAllister Excavation reports of Gezer and postulated a third Solomonic gate erroneously identified as a Hellenistic Tower. William G. Dever, who re-excavated Gezer utilizing the newer methods and techniques of the New Archaeology, found that Yadin's intuitions were correct.

Yadin's association of the 6-chambered gates of the Iron Age with the Solomonic building projects became the hallmark of the current archaeological position that associates the 10<sup>th</sup> century archaeological finds with the United Monarchy.

## **Myth of Solomon**

In the early 90s, a debate over the stratigraphy of the Iron Age appeared in several articles. The debate was initiated with an article by Wrightman who came out proposing a redating of stratigraphy associated with the 10<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the Solomonic levels. Wrightman renewed an earlier debate over the Iron Age stratigraphy of ancient Palestine based on the excavations of Samaria by Kathleen Kenyon. Wrightman based his stratigraphy on the results of Kenyon's excavations. Kenyon challenged Albright's ceramic chronology, dating the appearance of the red slip burnished pottery to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE and attempted to lower the Megiddo and Hazor stratigraphy (1957). One of the issues pertinent to the debate was whether sherds within the fill beneath the floor were contemporary with the surface.<sup>4</sup> The Samaria ceramic corpus was recently critiqued and reevaluated by Ron Tappy.<sup>5</sup> Wrightman's proposals were never seriously accepted or supported by the archaeological record. In fact, the debate went in another direction, as archaeologists discussed whether red slip burnished pottery first appeared along the coastal plain in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Phoenicia and Philistia).<sup>6</sup>

## CURRENT TRENDS AND ISSUES

---

<sup>4</sup> The methodological problems associated with dating a surface based on the fills below instead of the debris above were debated in the 1950s by K. Kenyon and G.E. Wright.

<sup>5</sup> The Archaeology of Israelite Samaria (1992).

<sup>6</sup> See Mazar (1900) and Holladay (0000) for a full discussion of the debate.

## Current Trends

Today, several basic questions face the archaeologist studying the United Monarchy. Can archaeology shed light on the transition from tribal society to a centralized rule of a Monarchy? Does the archaeological record reflect the existence of a mighty kingdom as that described in the biblical sources? Does the archaeological record reflect the internal development of the kingdom from Saul until the time of Solomon? The reality is that the archaeological evidence for the period of the United Monarchy is sparse, often controversial, and it does not provide unambiguous answers to these questions. So much so, that some critics have pointed out that we do not have anything that we can say belongs to David or Solomon. Some had even concluded that David and Solomon did not exist.

Currently, these Minimalists are *back peddling* in regards to the historicity of David and Solomon. Minimalists have abandoned the historicity of the Patriarchs, Moses and the Exodus, the Conquest & Settlement, and until recently, the United Monarchy. With the discovery of the Tel Dan inscription, they have had to admit that David was an actual person.<sup>7</sup>

The question today is not: Has archaeology proved that David and Solomon exist? But, What was the nature of the United Monarchy? Was it a large centralized kingdom from northern Syria to the Gulf of Aqaba, or was it a small tribal village controlled by a chiefdom? The answer depends on how you interpret the data. Today, there is a small group (minimalist camp), and only one prominent field archaeologist who claim that

---

<sup>7</sup> There was a period after the discovery where we saw a flurry of articles, papers, and discussions introducing a new social construct called Beit Daud. Some had even accused the excavator of planting or being fooled by a forgery. (These positions have not publicly been abandoned, but they are no longer prominently proposed.)

there was no state during the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but only a small chiefdom under the leadership of a small sheik—David.

### **Three Basic Issues**

There are three basic issues that are prevalent in the archaeological discussion of the United Monarchy. The first issue is the paucity and ambiguity of the data that can be assigned to the Monarchy. The second issue is the city of Jerusalem (City of David). There are no substantial 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE remains found in any of the excavations, particularly the City of David Excavations by Hebrew University under the direction of Yigal Shiloh. Since Jerusalem was the capital of the Monarchy, it is logical to assume that we should find remains of such an important city.

The third issue is a recent proposal by Israel Finkelstein to lower the dates of the Iron Age—the so-called *Low Chronology*. Of these three issues, the *Low Chronology* directly relates to the crux of any reconstructions of the history of the Iron Age.

### **The *Low Chronology***

There are two crucial ceramic corpuses, Lachish and Jezreel, and one theoretical ceramic distribution postulate, underlying Finkelstein's model. All archaeologists basically agree to the *relative dating* within the Iron Age ceramic horizon—the point of contention is the *absolute dating* of the horizon.

One of the tenets of Finkelstein's absolute dating is based on the dating of the Jezreel Enclosure to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The construction of the enclosure is associated with either Omri or Ahab (based on the biblical record). The pottery in the fills is similar

to 10<sup>th</sup> century pottery found at other sites, therefore Finkelstein pushes all assemblages that were previously dated 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, down to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

The second tenet of Finkelstein's *Low Chronology* is to date the appearance of the Philistine Monochrome Pottery after Lachish VI (1200-1150 BC). He assumes that sites traditionally dated to Iron Age IA (ca. 1200-1150/30 BCE) should contain the same ceramic forms. Thus, if Lachish VI is contemporary with Philistine Monochrome sites (e.g. Tel Miqne, Ashkelon, Tel Qasile, etc.), then we should find this type of pottery at Lachish. He concludes that since Lachish VI does not contain Philistine Monochrome pottery, this pottery must post-date the Iron Age IA level at Lachish. The result is an artificially created phase adding 70-100 years to the Iron Age cultural horizon. The implication is that there is now a cultural horizon in the southern Levant that is represented by major abandonments of several sites (over ½). Finkelstein has not offered an explanation as to where all these Iron Age people went at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Contrary to recent discussions, *there is not* a debate among archaeologists concerning the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE ceramic horizon. The proposal to redate the 10<sup>th</sup> century—Finkelstein's *Low Chronology*—has not been accepted by any other archaeologists!



## Methodological Comments

In regards to the first two issues (no physical remains & Jerusalem), three methodological comments are in order. The first is: the archaeological record is based on chance finds. Although archaeological research consists of systematic survey and excavation, the archaeological record does not provide a complete picture of a site, a period, or a region. The archaeological record itself has been destroyed and altered. As gaps in information are filled in, archaeologists reevaluate and provide new and fresh interpretations and reconstructions of the history. This leads to the second comment. The archaeological data is interpreted. We find a line of rocks and interpret it as a wall. The size of the wall determines if it is a small or large structure. We find surfaces associated with this wall and further define the wall as a domestic, or public structure, finds on the surface define whether the building was a palace or a temple.

The third methodological comment concerns the correlation between the archaeological and biblical record. The paradigm of the New Archaeology succeeded in separating the two disciplines of biblical studies and Syro-Palestinian archaeology. This was good because archaeologists work with a different dataset than biblical scholars, however, it was also unfortunate, because now we tend to talk past each other, usually in a polemical manner.

This last point is pertinent because it frames an important interpretive element of Iron Age archaeology. Would archaeologists reconstruct a unified state in the 10<sup>th</sup> century if we did not have the biblical text, particularly the narratives of the United Monarchy?

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA**

The key components of the archaeological record that provide evidence for the nature of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE are architectural features that exhibit a central authority, settlement processes (urbanization, regional standardization, population growth, demographic shifts), ethnographic analogy, and inscriptions. Naturally ceramic seriation plays a definitive role in the interpretation of the artifacts—this issue will be addressed at the end of the lecture.

### **Monumental Architecture**

Large public works have been typical identifying features of a state-level society. Evidence of monumental architecture dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE is found throughout ancient Palestine in the form of large public buildings, fortifications, palaces, and monumental ornamentation.

Several large public buildings have been found dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. These buildings are usually associated with gate complexes or palaces. They consist of cobbled flagstone surfaces with several rows of pillars supporting a superstructure. They have been interpreted as stables or storehouses, and recently, as marketplaces. The earliest examples are found along the coast in the 11<sup>th</sup> c. BCE (Qasile & Abu Hawam). This structure becomes common during the 9<sup>th</sup> c. as they are found at Megiddo, Lachish, Hazor, T. el Hesi, and at Beersheba. Irregardless of the functional interpretation of these

structures, they demonstrate a socio-economic behavior (both quality and quantity) that is found only in state-level societies.

In addition to these large public buildings, several palaces have been excavated.<sup>8</sup> At Megiddo, two palaces were excavated that date to the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. All the other palaces so far excavated, date to the 8-7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Ussishkin has postulated that the description of Solomon's palace and the Megiddo palaces get their design from the Syrian Types commonly referred to as *Bit Hilani*. They consists of a portico, throne room, and a great hall. Proto-Aeolic Capitals have also been found throughout the Iron Age. Large capitals are evidence of Palatial structures and are only found associated with monumental public buildings. Proto-Aeolic Capitals<sup>9</sup> have been found at Hazor, Megiddo, Samaria, Jerusalem and Ramat Rahal.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Megiddo, Samaria, Hazor, Lachish, Ramat Rahel, Jeruslam (E. Mazar).

<sup>9</sup> 34 total to date. Shiloh, The Proto-Aeolic Capital, Qedem 11 (1979).

<sup>10</sup> (Meeibiyeh, Jordon n. of Wadi Hassa.)

## Settlement Processes

One diagnostic feature defining the difference between a state and chiefdom is settlement processes. Analyses of settlement hierarchy, demographics, and settlement distribution can easily determine the nature of any ancient society. Archaeological surveys and excavations have well documented the process of urbanization in the Iron Age in the Western Highlands. Surveys of the Hill Country have shown that there were several small villages and towns that dominated the Ephraim and Manasseh Hills. Finkelstein has proposed that the urban planning across the span of the Iron Age demonstrates pastoralists settling down into circular settlements, which eventually evolve into the city plan of the Iron Age II. Site hierarchy distributions show that there was a structural imposition across the landscape that can only be attributed to a state level of societal development.

The Iron Age I period, associated with the period of the Conquest and Settlement, shows the gradual demographic and settlement shifts associated with sedentarization. Technological innovations in the hill country are terraced farming and plastered cisterns. These villages also contain a number of storage jars (pithoi).—collared rim

A new house type also appears in these villages that are transforming into towns— the 4-room house. Although, evidence suggests that it makes its first appearance along the coast in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, because it appears so frequently in the archaeological record of the hill country that it is commonly called the Israelite 4-room house in the literature.

Population estimates for the Iron Age shows a marked demographic shift between the villages of the Iron Age I and the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Document the rise of urbanization from the

## **Jerusalem**

Naturally when we discuss the kingdom of David and Solomon we must address the capital city of Jerusalem.

This is a major problem in regards to the evidence.

Living City

Steepness, topography, cheesemaker valley (build up)

each city destroyed the city beneath it to get to bedrock, complicated stratigraphy

built on top, 10<sup>th</sup>/LB, Blue = 7<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>

Reconstruction

Ophel Hill

## **Solomon's Temple**

Based on the biblical description of the tripartite temple built by Solomon, archaeologists are able to make ethnographic comparisons with other cultic structures found in excavations. Perhaps the most common has been the comparison between the Tainat Temple and Solomon's.

Recently, renewed investigations have found a similar temple at Ain Dara, also in Northern Syria.

## Lion Orthostat

Now just because we find a temple in Syria, it does not prove the existence of Solomon's temple. Archaeologists can look at the evolution and development of temples throughout history and match up the descriptions with the biblical text. Naturally, when one compares these temples, the description of Solomon's temple fits nicely with contemporary temples found up north. In the Iron Age II Period, the Broad Room temple becomes common. This temple is found in the Iron Age fortress at Arad and dates to the 9<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> c.

In terms of the cultic apparatus, we do find stands, and the ivory pomegranete .

Coming back to Jerusalem: Sum Up

## David in Texts

The question of the historicity of David became mute with the discovery in 1993 of the House of David Inscription (Tel Dan Inscription, Aramaic Inscription from Tel Dan). This was an inscription that was found in a secondary context in the plaza of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Its primary context would date to the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

A second inscription that mentions the House of David is a recent reconstruction in the Mesha Inscription that was recently proposed by Andre Lemaire.

K. Kitchen proposes a possible third occurrence of David in Egyptian texts. His reading of the Shishak inscription notes the Height's of David.

## Conclusion

Does archaeology conclusively prove David and Solomon existed with a capital in Jerusalem? I would have to say NO. If the question is rephrased—as to whether there is evidence for a State in the hill country in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, I would answer in the affirmative. Recent epigraphic finds, new comparative temples in Syria, renewed evaluation of the data in light of historical processes (e.g. urbanization, sedentarization, etc), and more sophisticated ceramic analyses, demonstrate that there is enough evidence to determine that a state existed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Now whether we can associate the state with a particular king is another question. With the epigraphic evidence and the biblical narrative, I think we can confidently associate this state found in the archaeological record with the Davidic Monarchy.

The king that Finkelstein offers is only a tribal chief controlling a loose group of tribes. His reconstruction only works if we move the Iron Age ceramic horizon down a century. It is logical to conclude that if we move the villages of the 11<sup>th</sup> c. in the Western Highlands down to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and the archaeological evidence for a state in the 10<sup>th</sup> century down to the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE—David becomes only a tribal king. The question facing our field is whether the *Low Chronology* is supported by the data. So far, no other archaeologist has supported this chronology in print or in academic meetings. No current excavation project is proposing this radical redating of the ceramic horizons (with the exception of Megiddo). I propose that Finkelstein and Silberman are hasty, if not disingenuous, in their historical reconstruction of the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Before the reconstructions of the *Low Chronology* can be offered as a viable hypotheses, Finkelstein needs to provide evidence for his redating. It appears that today,

when we discuss the archaeology of David and Solomon, we are back at the beginning. It still comes down to the pottery.

## **Future Research**

Today, the core of any archaeological interpretation is the accumulation of ceramic assemblages that extend throughout the Iron Age horizon. Since the Philistine corpus and the Lachish corpus are key to Finkelstein's *Low Chronology*, and recent historical reconstructions are in turn based on Finkelstein's proposals—the emphasis of future research should shift to the Shephelah. It is in this region that perhaps new excavations will provide the key to the Iron Age ceramic horizon.

### **Archaeological Record and the Biblical Narrative**

Now, archaeology appears to demonstrate that the biblical writers presented the Kingship of David and Solomon in a glorious and extravagant way. We do not see a megalopolis in the archaeological record. Did the biblical writers imagine a glorified past? If we read the text through 20<sup>th</sup> century lenses, they did. If we keep the writer's within a 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC context, they probably did see a great kingdom, which later became the blueprint for their theology.

The 9<sup>th</sup> century does produce evidence for a fully developed state when compared to the meager 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Therefore it makes sense to associate the rise of the state in Syro-Palestine at the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. I do find it difficult to believe that it



appeared out of nowhere—dropping out of the sky to be plopped down in the Western Highlands of ancient Israel. The catalyst for the Iron Age urban culture we see in the 9<sup>th</sup> century had to have started in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It becomes a mute point to decide if the state begins at the point where it initiates centralized authority or when enough time has passed to erect these massive public works.