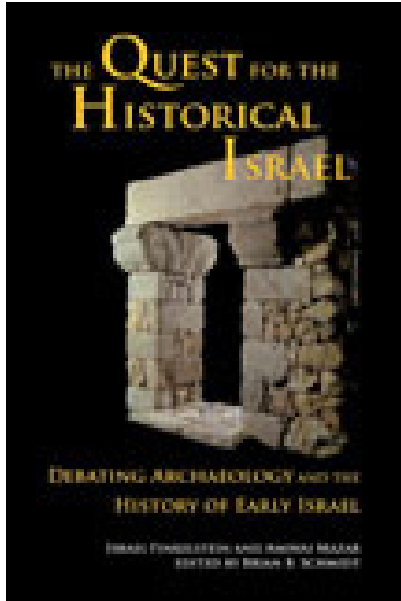


RBL 05/2009



Finkelstein, Israel, and Amihai Mazar; Brian B. Schmidt, ed.

The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel

Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies 17

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007. Pp. x + 220. Paper. \$24.95. ISBN 1589832779.

Ralph K. Hawkins
Kentucky Christian University
Grayson, Kentucky

The Quest for the Historical Israel contains papers that were delivered at the Sixth Biennial Colloquium of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism in Detroit, the main “intellectual arm” of the international movement of Secular Humanistic Judaism. In a preface, Sherwin T. Wine, the Provost of the Institute, explains that “humanistic Judaism depends on science for the story of the Jewish people” and that, with regard to the early history of the Jews, “it depends on archaeology” (ix). It was on this basis that the Institute brought together Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, two of the foremost Israeli archaeologists of modern times, to serve as the plenary speakers for the 2005 Colloquium, in which they were “to dialogue before an English-speaking lay audience for the first time” on the early history of Israel. In doing so, the Institute was “not looking for final answers to our questions” but “for believable answers” (ix). In an introduction, Brian Schmidt, of the University of Michigan, who served as the moderator, notes that one of the factors that made these lectures possible was the “urgent need for a new synthesis of Israel’s early history” (1). Schmidt notes that “these lectures follow three decades of dialogue, discussion, and debate within the interrelated disciplines of Syro-Palestinian archaeology, Israelite history, and Hebrew Bible. As each of these fields enters a period of synthesis and re-articulation, even renewed cross-fertilization, following an elongated phase of reassessment and, at times, polarization, a balanced articulation of the

issues and their resolution has become a desideratum” (1). The essays contained in this volume are intended to represent “two moderating perspectives.” Throughout the volume, Schmidt has added a summary of the issues and an introduction to each set of the presenters’ lectures. In this review, I will focus on part 1, which lays the groundwork for the approaches to be taken throughout the book, and part 2, as a sort of test case for how the authors then undertake their work and to identify some strengths and weaknesses of their respective approaches. I will only comment briefly on the remainder of the work.

Part 1, “Archaeology and the Quest for the Historical Israel in the Hebrew Bible,” deals with issues related to historiography and the relationship between archaeology and the Hebrew Bible. After an introduction by Schmidt, Finkelstein opens the discussion with a chapter entitled, “Digging for the Truth: Archaeology and the Bible.” Finkelstein introduces his comments by noting that, in the early days of scholarship, there was a conflict over the history of early Israel between two camps: a conservative school of thought and the higher-critical scholars. Finkelstein describes himself as “the voice of the center,” and explains that the Documentary Hypothesis, with slight revisions, is the lens through which he approaches the biblical text (p. 9). Finkelstein then proceeds to review the history of the aforementioned debates. In “The Rise and Fall of the Conservative Camp,” Finkelstein argues that conservative archaeologists essentially went into the field with the Bible in one hand and the spade in the other. The problem, however, was that “archaeology was not given center stage in the debate.” Instead, conservatives “promoted historical and archaeological reconstructions that had no actual support in the finds, or were trapped in circular argumentation” (10). After discussing some examples (Glueck and Dever), Finkelstein concludes that conservative scholars “reconstructed the history of Israel according to the biblical text” and again insists that “archaeology played only a supporting role” instead of taking center stage in the debate (12). Finkelstein then proceeds to a review of “The Rise and Fall of the Minimalist School,” in which he observes the minimalist conclusion that “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” (13). Finkelstein suggests that, like the conservative perception of the Bible, “this revisionist theory of the Bible’s utter lack of historical value had its own logical and archaeological inconsistencies.” Finkelstein devotes the remainder of this chapter laying out his own approach, “The View from the Center” (14–20), which, he suggests, “is far from either of the other two poles” in his foregoing review. Finkelstein’s approach to the biblical text as *historie regressiva* leads him “to read the texts in the reverse direction of their canonical order, beginning with the safe anchor of the period of their compilation” (15). This means that the biblical stories of Israel’s formative periods

tell readers more about the society and politics of Judah in the late monarchical period and that, because of the ideological nature of the texts, modern readers cannot approach these texts uncritically. In contrast to reliance on the Bible, Finkelstein turns to archaeology for “a completely different story” (16). Finkelstein illustrates this approach with a couple of examples, but he focuses on Israel’s formative period, for which he says that “archaeology is the only source of information,” since the biblical accounts “are almost complete expressions of the political and theological ideology of Josianic times” (16). He also asserts that archaeology is “the sole witness” for the tenth century B.C.E. In short, archaeology is the “queen of the battle,” since neither the Pentateuch nor the Deuteronomistic History could have been written until the late-eighth century B.C.E. at the earliest. This means that “only archaeology can assist scholars in identifying ... earlier traditions” that may have fed into those later productions (17). Finkelstein concludes by offering six guidelines for “a viable reconstruction” of the early history of Israel, as follows: (1) archaeology is the only “real-time witness” to many of the events described in biblical texts, especially the formative period; (2) the ideological nature of the biblical text precludes its acceptance as modern history; (3) biblical history must be read as *historie regressive*; (4) old stories incorporated in the biblical text are shaped by the ideology of the later author(s); (5) only archaeology can separate the sources of which the text is comprised; and (6) the growth of Judah to statehood marks the starting point for the compilation of the biblical text (19–20). “Had such guidelines been applied from the outset of the modern biblical-historical enterprise,” Finkelstein asserts, “we would not have wasted a century on futile research” (20).

Mazar continues the discussion with a chapter entitled, “On Archaeology, Biblical History, and Biblical Archaeology” (21–33), which he begins by summarizing the aim of the essays, which is to elucidate the relationship between the Hebrew Bible, archaeology, and historical reconstruction and to address the question of the extent to which archaeology can contribute to the resolution of these questions (21). He first provides an overview of the development of archaeology into a “mature, full-blown social-scientific discipline with its own research methods and theoretical frameworks” (22), beginning with its emergence out of “biblical archaeology” and concluding with discussions of processualist and postprocessualist archaeology (22–28). Mazar then discusses the subject of the historicity of the Bible, making note that he and Finkelstein “stand at two different points on the centrist continuum” but that they “share more in common than [they do] with either of the two extreme groups described above” (29). While Mazar accepts that the Torah, the Deuteronomistic History, and parts of the prophetic and wisdom literature were composed during the late monarchy, and possibly underwent expansion during the exilic and postexilic periods, he also accepts “the view of many scholars that the late-monarchic authors utilized earlier materials and sources” (29). These may have included:

Jerusalem temple archives; palace archives; public commemorative inscriptions, some of which may have been centuries old; ancient poetry that had been preserved through oral transmission; folk and aetiological stories from the remote past; and earlier historiographic writings cited in the text, such as the “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel.”

Mazar explains that, “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.” He envisions the Bible’s historical perspective as “a telescope” looking back in time: “the farther in time we go back, the more dim the picture becomes” (30). While acknowledging such things as “selective memory and memory loss, censorship, and biases due to ideological, theological, personal, or other motivations,” Mazar argues that these are not conditions unique to ancient historiography but that they apply just as much to modern historiography. He concludes that, “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” (31).

Only after having provided these overviews of archaeology and the history and historiography of the Bible does he turn to discussing the relationship between the two in a section entitled, “The Role of Archaeology and the Definition of ‘Biblical Archaeology’” (31–33). Mazar notes that establishing a relationship between finds and texts is “one of the most difficult” tasks that faces archaeologists and historians. He suggests, however, that archaeology can provide “presumably objective” data on the realia related to historical issues under examination and that it “has the potential to provide independent judgment of biblical sources by allowing us to examine in certain cases their historical reliability” (31). Archaeology certainly illuminates some aspects of early Israelite life that are of no concern to the biblical writers and therefore go unmentioned. Mazar notes here that archaeological data is not completely objective but that it must be interpreted, which is a subjective process:

However, the interpretation of archaeological data and its association with the biblical text may in 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 artifact. In many cases, when archaeological discoveries are utilized in order to prove one historical paradigm over another, we are confronted with arguments that are, at their core, circular. This was true for William F. Albright and his followers, and it 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. (31)

Despite this, archaeology plays an invaluable role. Correlations can be made between the biblical text and archaeological data, but, beyond that, archaeology is “the main tool for reconstructing many aspects of Israelite society” (32). At this juncture Mazar discusses the term “biblical archaeology” and argues for its viability, defining it as inclusive of “all aspects of archaeological research that are related to the world of the Bible,” including the entire Middle East and eastern Mediterranean, in that each of these regions contributes to our understanding of the biblical world. Mazar explains that, “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” (33). Mazar’s conclusions are worth citing at length:

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 naïve and fundamentalist approach to the text and, on the other, any excessively manipulative, uncritical, or imaginative interpretations. (33).

With Part 1 having set forth each scholar’s basic approach to the subject, parts 2–5 proceed to treat various portions of the biblical story. The subsequent sections include: part 2: “Using Archaeology to Assess the Bible’s Traditions about ‘The Earliest Times’” (35–65); part 3: “The Historical Origins of Collective Israel” (67–98); part 4: “The Tenth Century: The New Litmus Test for the Bible’s Historical Relevance” (99–139); part 5: “On More Secure Ground? The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Iron II Period” (141–79). Finkelstein and Mazar approach these various portions of Israel’s history, both in terms of the archaeology and the biblical text, using the methodology they laid out in part 1. The organization of this book, with the views of Finkelstein and Mazar set side by side, makes for an interesting read and highlights the differences in the approaches of these two archaeologists. Even though Finkelstein and Mazar may “stand at two different

points on the centrist continuum” (29), one can easily see that each views the value and role of both archaeology and the Bible in very different ways. Throughout the work, for example, Finkelstein repeats the refrain that archaeology should be “given center stage in the debate” (e.g., 9, 12, 17, 19). The idea that archaeology should completely trump the biblical texts seems to me to expect far too much from archaeology. Others have argued that archaeology should write its own, independent histories, free of any reliance on texts at all. S. A. Rosen, for example, has recently written that archaeology should be able to function as a discipline “independent of standard text-based historical reconstruction” (“The Tyranny of Texts: A Rebellion against the Primary of Written Documents in Defining Archaeological Agendas,” in *I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times: Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday* [ed. A. M. Maeir and P. de Miroschedji; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006], 881). He notes that “prehistorians do this all the time” (880). However, the absence of texts to provide interpretive constraints has resulted in the production of some narratives that stretch credulity (see, e.g., the criticism of the supposed archaeological reconstruction of “original matriarchy” in R. R. Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005]). The historian cannot escape the use of the biblical text in approaching the history of ancient Israel. As J. M. Miller has observed, “simply to use the name ‘Israel’ in association with the Iron Age means to draw on written sources” (“Is It Possible to Write a History of Israel without Relying on the Hebrew Bible?” in *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel’s Past* [ed. D. V. Edelman; JSOTSup 127; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991], 94). B. Halpern has insisted that those who attempt to dispense with the biblical text in the process of writing histories of Israel are “abdicating” the historian’s responsibility to consider the text carefully for what information it might provide (“Erasing History: The Minimalist Assault on Ancient Israel,” *BAR* 11.6 [1995]: 29). Mazar’s approach is different from that of Finkelstein, in that he sees archaeological data as having limitations, and he places more value on the Bible as a source of historical information. With regard to the archaeological data, Mazar views them as having “the potential to provide independent judgment on biblical sources,” yet this is a potential that is limited by the fact that archaeological data must be interpreted, which means “that many archaeological conclusions are not certifiably factual, no matter when or by whom they were proposed” (31). Mazar also seems to be suggesting a more prominent role for the biblical sources in the reconstruction of ancient Israelite history, and he suggests that information in the Deuteronomistic History and other biblical texts may have historical value. He explains that, “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” (30).

The fundamentally different approaches of Finkelstein and Mazar to the data are evident in their approaches to the various subjects they treat throughout parts 2–5. In part 2, for example, Finkelstein asserts that the search for a historical Abraham has failed and that the patriarchal accounts “represent the ideology and needs of the period when the stories were set down in writing, that is, in late monarchic and post-exilic times” (46). He bases this assessment on supposed anachronisms that appear throughout the patriarchal stories, such as the appearance of camels as domesticated animals and of Edom as a political entity (46–47). Mazar, on the other hand, suggests that the origin of the patriarchal, exodus, and conquest stories is still an open question: “the questions of when and with whom these stories originated and what is the background to their creation can still be asked” (59). Mazar concludes, “I continue to believe that some of the parallels between the second-millennium B.C.E. culture of the Levant and the cultural background portrayed in the Patriarchal stories as mentioned above are too close to be ignored, indicating that perhaps certain components in the biblical stories are recollections of memories rooted in the second millennium and preserved through common memory and oral traditions” (59). These differences in approach characterize the remainder of the book and allow the reader to see the implications of these two approaches for each subject under study. Parts 4 and 5 include a valuable summary of the ongoing debate about the dating of strata that has conventionally been associated with the united monarchy.

While the reader should certainly assess the approaches of both Finkelstein and Mazar, it seems to me that Finkelstein’s contributions contain frequent overstatement and occasional inaccuracies. In part 2, for example, in his discussion of the patriarchal accounts, he sets forth a number of supposed anachronisms and other features that betray the “fact” that “the biblical story of the Patriarchs is not the story of Middle Bronze Canaan” (45). Two of the anachronisms cited by Finkelstein were mentioned above: the appearance of camels as domesticated animals and of Edom as a political entity. Finkelstein writes that “we know that camels were not domesticated as beasts of burden earlier than the early first millennium” (46). However, there is a growing body of scholars who believe that camel domestication must have occurred prior to the twelfth century B.C.E. and that the patriarchal narratives accurately reflect this (see, e.g., O. Borowski, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* [Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira, 1998], 112–18). Likewise, R. W. Younker, who has collected data on ancient camel domestication for years, recently discovered and published a short study of some camel petroglyphs located in the Wadi Nasib, for which he proposes a date of circa 1500 B.C.E. (“Late Bronze Age Camel Petroglyphs in the Wadi Nasib, Sinai,” *NEASB* 42 [1997]: 47–54). With regard to Edom, Finkelstein argues that it did not emerge as a developed political entity until the eighth century B.C.E. (47–48). The recent work of T. E. Levy in the Faynan district, however, clearly contradicts these assertions. In a recent article, for

example, Levy outlines some of the recent work at Khirbat en-Nahas, the largest Iron Age metal production site in the Faynan district (“‘You Shall Make for Yourself No Molten Gods’: Some Thoughts on Archaeology and Edomite Ethnic Identity,” in *Sacred History, Sacred Literature: Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman on His Sixtieth Birthday* [ed. S. Dolansky; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008], 239–55). The pottery assemblages from tenth- and ninth-century B.C.E. Khirbat en-Nahas are both dominated by local “Edomite” styles and fabrics, suggesting an Edomite ethnogenesis long before the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. Finkelstein also argues that things *not* mentioned in the biblical text betray the “fact” that “the biblical story of the Patriarchs is not the story of Middle Bronze Canaan” (45). An example of this occurs when he observes that MBA Canaan “was a period of advanced urban life ... dominated by a group of powerful city-states ruled from such capitals as Hazor and Megiddo.... But in the biblical text we do not see this at all” (45). As proof of this, he points to the absence of Shechem, a substantial stronghold in the MBA, from the patriarchal accounts. This is a glaring inaccuracy, as Shechem is mentioned no less than seventeen times in Gen 12–37. These are but a few examples of the kinds of overstatement and inaccuracy that I found all too often in Finkelstein’s work. Mazar’s assertions, on the other hand, seem to reflect a more “holistic” approach. Without naïvely accepting all the data or simplistic reconstructions of that data, he attempts to take into account all the archaeological, biblical, and extrabiblical data in a way that seeks to let it speak for itself where it can. In his discussion of the patriarchs, for example, he “continues to believe” that some of the parallels between second-millennium B.C.E. Levantine culture correspond with the patriarchal portrayal, which thus suggests some degree of historicity. However, he concludes that

This does not mean that the stories should be taken at face value as reflecting the deeds of actual people, nor should they be taken literally as reflecting actual ancestral history. On the contrary, this aspect of the stories may indeed be a late innovation. I merely wish to claim that some elements of the second-millennium B.C.E. milieu mentioned above, such as private names, place-names, and the status of a Semitic prince in the Egyptian court, may suggest that the stories contain kernels of old traditions and stories rooted in second-millennium B.C.E. realia. (59)

This quote reflects the caution taken by Mazar in dealing with the various sources—archaeological and textual—in each of his papers throughout the volume.

The book draws to a close with part 6: “So What? Implications for Scholars and Communities” (181–95). In his concluding remarks, Finkelstein repeats the arguments he made in his first paper. Biblical archaeology has been dominated by the biblical story, and this approach should be replaced by one that studies archaeology “independently of the

biblical text” (184). Archaeology, Finkelstein asserts, “should play the first violin in the orchestra constructing the daily realities of antiquity.” In addition, biblical history must be read as *historie regressiva*, which “means that the early chapters in Israelite history—the narratives of the Patriarchs, Exodus, Conquest, as well as the golden age of David and Solomon—cannot be understood as portraying straightforward historical realities.” Instead, it must be realized that the biblical history “was written in order to serve an ideological platform” (185). Finkelstein clarifies as follows:

What I am trying to say is that faith and historical research should not be juxtaposed, harmonized, or compromised. When we sit to read the Hagadah at Passover, we do not deal with the question of whether or not archaeology supports the story of the Exodus. Rather, we praise the beauty of the story and its national universal values. Liberation from slavery *as a concept* is at stake, not the location of Pithom. In fact, attempts to rationalize stories like this, as many scholars have tried to do in order to “save” the Bible’s historicity, are not only sheer folly, but in themselves an act of infidelity. According to the Bible, the God of Israel stood behind Moses and there is no need to presume the actual occurrence of a high or low tide in this or that lake in order to make His acts faith-worthy. (187)

In his concluding remarks, Mazar agrees to some extent. He finds that “the values, the theological ideas, and the intellectual messages of the Bible do not need archaeological confirmation. They stand on their own as some of the unique achievements of ancient Israel” (190). Yet he expresses his disagreement with Finkelstein’s approach to the biblical history as *historie regressiva*: “In my view, it lacks sufficient proof and detaches the stories from their original settings” (191). He understands Israelite historiography to have been a “much longer and more complex process of compilation, editing, and copying of the biblical text” that incorporated materials “that precede the time of compilation by hundreds of years, some of them even rooted in the second and early-first millennia B.C.E.” (191). The Bible, therefore, contains a rich heritage of Israelite history and historiography, and biblical archaeology is one means by which the knowledge of the past and of the Jewish heritage can be transmitted. As such, biblical archaeology “remains part and parcel of our Western education and heritage” (195).

The Quest for the Historical Israel concludes with a short, one-page glossary, a list of resources for further reading, many of which are grouped into categories of “ultra-conservative approaches,” “conservative approaches,” “moderate-critical approaches,” and “revisionist approaches,” and two indexes. The book is aimed at a general yet highly educated audience. It introduces its topics and deals with them in a way that educated nonspecialists may follow the arguments being made, and it is not encumbered with

footnotes or internal citations. Readers who want to follow up can certainly do so through the use of the list of resources for further reading. While the lectures in the book were originally presented to an organization of educated nonspecialists, the organization of the book would naturally lend itself to usage in the classroom as a supplementary text that gives an overview of two approaches to historical and archaeological issues in the history of Israel. As such, it would make an excellent supplementary text for courses in biblical archaeology, history of Israel, or other specialized courses in Hebrew Bible. However *The Quest for the Historical Israel* is used, it certainly will not end the debate over the various historical and archaeological issues with which it is concerned. Instead, it will provide both an excellent entry point for those seeking to enter the debate as well as fuel for further research.