



## The Quest for the Historical Israel - a review

Richard S. Hess

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

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

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Finkelstein and Mazar represent two of the most influential Israeli archaeologists of the present generation. Finkelstein is a professor at Tel Aviv University while Mazar is a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The former is well known for his revision of the traditional chronology of Iron Age Israel, c. 1200-586 B.C. The latter has also published widely on the topic, including a standard textbook on the archaeology of ancient Israel. However, Mazar represents a position closer to the traditional dating and interpretation of the archaeological and biblical evidence. This volume represents the lectures given by the two scholars at the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism in Detroit in October of 2005. Schmidt, professor at the University of Michigan, has divided the volume into six parts. The first and last sections discuss methodology in relating archaeology and the Bible. The four intervening parts move progressively through the Old Testament narrative, examining the the stories of Genesis and Exodus, Israel's appearance in the land as found in Joshua and Judges, the United Monarchy, and the subsequent Divided Monarchy. Each of the six sections begins with a summary by Schmidt that briefly reviews the arguments that Finkelstein and then Mazar go on

to present in greater detail.

Finkelstein begins his first lecture with a review of the research and writing on the history of Israel over the last century. He rejects the work of the American school as represented by William F. Albright. He characterizes this as attempting to use archaeology to prove the Bible. Finkelstein also rejects what he terms as the "minimalist" school of scholars who have sought to fix the creation and writing of the Old Testament largely in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. In place of these he argues for his "centrist" position. This view understands the period of Josiah (c. 640-609 B.C.) as formative for everything before it. In other words, the scribes of Josiah's age created or rewrote the "Bible" to conform to the concerns and religious values of Josiah's time. Therefore, events closer to this period, such as things that the Bible would place in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries B.C., are deemed more reliable. Those described earlier are of little value and only occasional historical worth. For Finkelstein the key role of archaeology becomes the defining touchstone by which all biblical matters are to be evaluated.

In some of his statements Mazar appears to agree with Finkelstein. However, in his interpretation of the archaeological and biblical data, his conclusions are significantly different. Most importantly, Mazar does not regard the study of archaeology as an absolute guide to the biblical text. Instead, he recognizes the presence of bias in any and every interpretation of the facts of material culture. Further, Mazar seems to be much more aware and conversant with the important evidence of ancient Near Eastern texts. For him, these can factor with a significance similar to that of the material culture.

This distinction is evident in part two, that includes a survey of the ancestors ("patriarchs"), exodus, and the "conquest" of Joshua. Finkelstein dismisses the old comparisons of the Mari texts with the customs of Abram and his successors. He then spends a great deal of time discussing "anachronisms" such as the mention of camels. This chapter, which largely repeats the relevant material from I. Finkelstein and N. Silberman's earlier volume *The Bible Unearthed* (and for which see my review article in *Denver Journal* 4 [2001]; reprinted in *Bible and Spade* 15.4 [2002])

123-127), ignores the recent studies of hundreds of newly published letters and texts from Middle Bronze Age Mari (see e.g., W. Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari* [Eisenbrauns, 2003]; reviewed by R. Hess in *Denver Journal* 8 [2005]). Many statements at face value betray an ignorance of biblical and extrabiblical textual data. Contrary to Finkelstein, Shechem is mentioned repeatedly in Genesis 33-37. Further, the names of the patriarchs were not "common" in later periods. Simply stating this as a fact doesn't make it true. Kenneth Kitchen has done the hard work of collecting and counting these types of names in the different periods, and that statistical evidence has never been refuted. See conveniently his *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 341-343, and especially the related footnotes on pp. 574-575. It is wrong to say, as Finkelstein does, that Edom emerged as a "fully developed state" only in the late eighth century B.C. This is contradicted by the excavations directed by Thomas Levy in the lowland mining settlements of the Wadi Feinan and the evidence there for monumental building and major copper production phases as early as the twelfth century B.C. and again in the tenth and ninth centuries. See Thomas E. Levy *et al.*, "Lowland Edom and the High and Low Chronologies: Edomite State Formation, the Bible, and Recent Archaeological Research in Southern Jordan," pp. 129-163 in T. E. Levy and T. Higham eds., *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science* (London: Equinox, 2005). Again, the view that Genesis 14 "provides geographical information relevant only to the seventh century B.C.E." is not true. In fact, the only time when Elam challenges the West Semitic world is in the eighteenth century B.C. Mari texts (cf. Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari*, p. 609, for some of the references). I thank Dan Fleming for pointing out this geopolitical reality to me in an oral communication. Thus the texts of Genesis 14:1 and 5 that place a king of Elam at the head of a coalition of forces that move into the western Levant could not have been imagined in the seventh century B.C., but appear authentic to the geopolitics of the eighteenth century B.C. It is not necessary to go on as this review of pp. 45-52 of Finkelstein's contribution demonstrates the weaknesses inherent in his presentation. This is not merely a question of taking the alternative side of an argument; it is a matter of not recognizing the existence of facts (especially) in texts that

directly contradict statements.

Mazar looks at the same biblical material without the presumption that those narratives long predating Josiah must be so ideologically saturated as to have no historical worth for the periods they purport to describe. He writes, "*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...*" (p. 59). Thus while there remain issues (e.g., Edom and questions about the existence of apparently uninhabited sites, p. 61), Mazar does not move us so far away from an original horizon of the text itself.

I will not belabor further issues with the details of the study. The student of Old Testament history will find one of the best summaries of the recent debate concerning the dating of strata traditionally ascribed to the United Monarchy of David and Solomon in parts four and five. Finkelstein and Mazar provide the best alternatives to this vexing issue and enable the reader to understand the implications of a late date for biblical history. In the end Mazar's expansion of Iron Age IIA to cover c. 980-830 B.C. probably has the most merit for explaining the evidence for all periods.

A word should be said about the concluding summary. Finkelstein reiterates his method of beginning with Josiah's era and moving backward in time. Mazar takes a different approach. He explores the question of the importance of biblical history for those religious and political (Zionist) "believers". On p.190 he quotes approvingly the observations of Yair Zakovitch that, were proof to be found to eradicate any historical value to the Bible, it would not matter because the book's value is found in the cultural achievement of creating and preserving a people's identity. This, however, is not this reviewer's view nor is it one that sits well with classic Christian theology. The nature of the Judeo-Christian God is rooted in historic acts of redemption and in historic revelation. Thus these must be subject to historical tests. Their vulnerability to historical falsification is also one of their strongest points. The faith engendered by such purported divine acts did not originate and remain outside of history and time in a mythological era, nor does it remain in the purely interior and subjective personalities of each

individual who subscribes to it. Rather, such faith makes historical claims that call for real decisions: whether God is or is not one who redeems people in history and so may continue to act. This, however, moves us beyond the purview of this provocative and informative book.

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