

The Bible and Believers, the Power of the Past

and Antiquated Archaeology in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

From the very beginning of Israel's history, two national concepts have dominated Jewish life: the concepts of the Chosen People and the Promised Land. Most Jews have lived in Palestine for merely a short period of the last three thousand years, and a Jewish state, or states, has only existed precariously, and just for a few centuries. Still, the Jews have throughout time felt tied to the Land by a close and unique link. Biblical archaeology and Israel as a nation state have a mutual interest in a certain type of archaeological interpretations and explanations. Both the religious and the nationalist prejudices favour an epistemology based on the traditional cultural-historical paradigm that most scholars abandoned after the Second World War. Archaeology has by its nature an unavoidable political dimension. In the Near East, it is possible to trace a long history of politically inspired archaeology that has been harmful to archaeologists, its material and ethnic minorities. The paradoxical situation that the epistemology of biblical archaeology is similar to German archaeology before the Second World War has occurred. Thus, Israel claims that the nation's population is superior to others on the basis of past achievements. Biblical archaeology serve to establish political and territorial legitimacy and to the maintenance of cultural identity and ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

Sir Mortimer Wheeler said that Palestine is the country «where more sins have probably been committed in the name of archaeology than any commensurate portion of the earth's surface» (Laughlin 2000:3). From the very beginning of Israel's history, two national concepts have dominated Jewish life: the concepts of the Chosen People and the Promised Land. Most Jews have lived in Palestine for merely a short period of the last three thousand years, and a Jewish state, or states, has only existed precariously, and just for a few centuries. Still, the Jews have throughout time felt tied to the Land by a close and unique link (Kohn 1971:807). The Palestinian history demands its own time and space, something which it has been denied for more than a century by the discourse of biblical studies (Whitelam 1997:69). No culture has existed «since time immemorial» and no people is aboriginal in terms of their contemporary culture with a specific piece of real estate; ethno-genesis is a fact, but it does not imply that cultures exhibit the characteristics present at their birth forever (Kohl & Tsetskhladze 1995:151). Biblical archaeology and Israel as a nation state have a mutual interest in certain types of archaeological interpretations and explanations. Biblical archaeology is a branch of archaeology searching to find archaeological evidence which somehow has a direct relationship to the biblical text. The problem then becomes whether the archaeologists believe that the Bible is a Holy Scripture or not. The war going on between Israelis and Palestinians may illuminate how the past is used to favour one ethnic group's territorial claims, and how the integration of religion, politics and archaeology is a lethal tool in the Middle East. The past is presence and power. How do archaeologists handle this problem?

THE BIBLE AND BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

«Biblical archaeology» is defined by William Albright as anything that «may be restricted to Palestine, or it may be extended to include everything that illustrates the Bible, however superficially. Accordingly, I shall use the term «biblical archaeology» here to refer to all Biblical lands – from India to Spain, and from southern Russia to Southern Arabia – and to the whole history of those lands from about 10, 000 B. C., or even earlier, to the present time» (op. cit. Dever 1990:14).

The American biblical scholar and archaeologist H. D. Lance argued that biblical archaeology «is a *biblical* discipline which exists for the benefit and interest of biblical studies. So long as people read the Bible and asks questions about history and culture of the ancient world which produced it, those questions have to be answered; and the sum of those answers will comprise biblical archaeology» (Lance 1981:95).

The Biblical archaeology movement in its classic form, which dominated the American scene until about 1970, was rather a subsidiary of Biblical theological studies than a branch of Near Eastern Archaeology. It was a chapter in the history of American religious life. The practitioners were all biblical scholars and teachers; almost without exception «amateur» in the sense that they were part-time archaeologists. The sites chosen for excavation were biblical, and their support came from seminaries and church-affiliated institutions and individuals (Dever 1990:19). This is more or less the situation even today, and the discourses or the «scientific» parts of biblical archaeology are often loaded with emotional and fundamentalist Christian arguments and statements (Lemche 1998).

«I suppose it is every biblical archaeologist's dream to find at least one important document from the ancient world that somehow has a direct relation to the biblical text» (Geraty 1985:131). This point of departure leads scholars to ask the wrong questions, search for answers that do not exist, and interpret the archaeological material in an unscientific way. The problem is twofold. 1) What kind of book is the Bible – is it a Holy Book or not? 2) Is it possible to relate archaeological material with the scriptures?

For Christian believers, the Bible represents The Truth. Thus, the descriptions of events in the Bible *really took* place, and should therefore represent a chronological framework and be possible to trace in the archaeological record. The oldest parts of the Bible may, according to some Christian orthodox scholars, date back to the late second- or early first-millennium BC and the younger parts were later written chronologically. Finally, the parts were edited into one book – the Bible. This has to be seen in light of an inscription found on an Egyptian stele dated to the time of pharaoh Merneptah (*ca.* 1213–1203 BC). This stele has the earliest reference to «Israel» as a community known from any of the ancient texts. The question has been whether or not Merneptah's «Israel» is identical with the Bible's Israel (Laughlin 2000:87-90). Is there some sort of «historical events» behind the biblical stories?

According to the theologian Thomas L. Thompson, «*it is only as history that the Bible does not make sense*» (Thompson 1999:210). The Bible's «Israel» is not only a

literary fiction – the Bible begins as a tradition already established. It is a stream of stories, songs and reflections, collected, discussed and debated by the narrators (Thompson 1999:xv).

If we reflect on how easy it is to challenge the historicity not only of David or Solomon but of events in the reigns of Hezekiah or Josiah, or on how persuasive a dating to the Persian period or later of biblical traditions might appear today, the very substance of any historical project that attempts to write a history of the late second- or early first-millennium BC in Palestine on the basis of a direct integration of biblical and extrabiblical sources, bridging a gap not only of centuries but of a near total political, social and cultural dislocation, must appear not only dubious but wholly ludicrous.

(Thompson 1992:403).

The date of the Bible is crucial in this debate, and Thompson dates the Bible to somewhere in between the 5th–3rd century BC, or even later. It is the date of the historical context of the *texts* and not the traditions that matters. These are first known from Qumran in the second century BC, which also clearly shows that the formation of biblical books was still in process. No Bible as such existed in the Hellenistic period, only some specific texts and collections of them (Thompson 1999:254). It is impossible to make direct use of the Bible: the biblical archaeological project has failed because the Bible's world does not belong to the discipline of archaeologists. «To use the biblical traditions as the primary source for the history of Israel's origin, is to establish a hopeless situation for the historian who wants to write critical, rather than anachronistic, history» (Thompson 1987:26).

ARCHAEOLOGY AND NATIONALISM

The primary role of archaeology as a nationalistic discipline is to «anchor» the nation by simultaneously making it timeless and very old. Therefore, nationalism itself finds its reasons and its roots in the past (Sørensen 1996:28). And if a nation is «anchored» in a certain territory, within that limited geographical space or territory, there are no possibilities for other nations to «anchor». The ideology behind the «anchor» is nationalism. Archaeological restorations and excavations, followed by state-sponsored, printed editions of traditional texts, can be perceived as a form of

conservative education programme (Anderson 1993:181). Nationalism is deeply embedded in the very concept of archaeology, in its institutions and its development (Díaz-Andreu & Champion 1996:2–3). If nations exist, they must, by definition, have a past, for their own good as well as for the individuals who belong to them (Díaz-Andreu 1996:68). Questions such as «when did this state emerge?» are in a multi-ethnic society in reality «did our state emerge before other groups came here, and if so, was the latter state-formation process dependent upon the former?» Thereby, a question that invites ethnic partisanship arises (Wailles & Zoll 1995:23).

Timothy Kaiser lists some of the ways authorised versions of the past may be used to legitimate the current order. (1) The establishment of a link between present governors and ultimate sources of power and legitimacy which resides in the past is made. (2) Claims that a nation's population in some way or another is superior to all the other on the basis of past achievements are forwarded. (3) Glorification of the present is made by casting the past in an unfavourable light (Kaiser 1995:113). In this regard archaeology may serve to (i) establish political and territorial legitimacy, (ii) buttressing political ideology, (iii) maintenance of cultural identity and ethnicity, and finally (iiii) the invention of tradition (ibid.) Benedict Anderson makes an analytical distinction between nationalism and racism, a distinction that is useful and clarifying in the further discussion of biblical archaeology:

The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history. Niggers are, thanks to the invisible tar-brush, forever Niggers; Jews, the seed of Abraham, forever Jews, no matter what passports they carry or what languages they speak and read.

(Anderson 1993:149).

Moreover, racism and anti-Semitism do not manifest themselves across- but within the national borders. Thus, they justify not so much foreign wars but rather domestic repression and domination (ibid:150).

NAZI ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE CULTURE-HISTORICAL PARADIGM

The culture-historical approach, which gained support at the beginning of the 20th century, laid the foundation for the nationalistic use of archaeology. The classic example of misuse and nationalistic use of archaeology is Nazi Germany's political manipulation of the past. The pre-historian Gustav Kossinna is inevitably linked to the ethnic, nationalistic and fascist interpretations in favour of the Third Reich. In 1911, Kossinna claimed that German prehistory was an «eminently national discipline». During a time of strong nationalism and chauvinism just before, during and after the First World War, Kossinna's view was radicalised. In 1917, he presented a «wartime lecture» where he focused on the «old Germanic cultural achievement», and spoke of «our racial, cultural superiority over other peoples» (Wiwjorra 1996:174–175).

In 1911, Gustav Kossinna defined and systematically applied the concept of an archaeological culture in conjunction with the «direct ethno-historical» method in the book *Die Herkunft der Germanen* or *The Origin of the Germans*. His axiom was that in all periods, sharply delineated archaeological culture areas are equally and clearly recognisable as peoples and tribes. Cultures were defined on material traits, associated with sites in a particular region and time, and cultural continuity was assumed to reflect ethnic continuity (Jones 1997:16).

The works of Gustav Kossinna in particular, established the basis in German archaeological methodology. This culture-historical view also influenced European and British archaeology. When we evaluate this culture-historical approach to archaeology, we have to criticise it on the basis of its own background. It seems plausible that Kossinna based his views of culture on notions which were generally accepted by his contemporaries within their culture-historical paradigm. Gordon V. Childe has been one of the most influential and prominent persons in the history of archaeology. Some of his earlier works illuminate how the thoughts of Gustav Kossinna were common among archaeologists in the 1920s and 1930s. Characteristically for the archaeology of the time, the concept of «culture» was rarely defined. However, in *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929), he defines the concept and this may illustrate that the ideas of Kossinna were common:

We find certain types of remains – pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites, house forms – constantly recurring together. Such a complex of regularly associated traits we shall term a «cultural group» or just a «culture». We assume that such a complex is the mate-

rial expression of what would to-day be called a «people» (as the adjective from «people», corresponding to the German «völkische», we may use the term «ethnic»). Only where the complex in question is regularly and exclusively associated with skeletal remains of a specifically physical type would we venture to replace «people» by the term «race».

(Childe 1929:v–vi).

Only four years after, Childe rejected – or became sceptical of this view of culture, and especially critical to Kossinna's Indo-Germanic interpretation and his racist assumptions. In 1933, he wrote an article where he asked the question «Is Prehistory Practical?» Childe took moral and ethical responsibility, and clarified the, at that time, popular and common confusion between race and culture or race and language. He emphasised that human physical features have nothing to do with «race» or ethnicity (Childe 1933:416).

Bruce Trigger (1989:164–167) sums up some of the basic premises of Gustav Kossinna. (1) Cultures are inevitably a reflection of ethnicity. Thus, similarities and differences in material culture correlate with similarities and differences in ethnicity. (2) Clearly defined cultural provinces correspond with major ethnic groups or peoples. (3) Cultural continuity indicates ethnic continuity. (4) The distribution of artefact types that were characteristics of specific tribal groups reflect where these groups lived during different periods in prehistory (settlement archaeology). (5) By identifying historically known tribal groups with particular archaeological cultures for the early historic period, it is possible to archaeologically trace them back in time. (6) Racist and chauvinistic interpretations in favour of nationalistic aims and needs. Racism is the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics that determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that ones own race is superior and therefore has the right to rule others. It may be executed as a policy of enforcing such asserted rights, for instance by a system of government and society upon which it is based .

BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE CULTURE-HISTORICAL PARADIGM

It is surprising that biblical archaeology uses some, in certain cases all, these six characteristics of the traditional culture-historical interpretations:

1) *Cultures are inevitably a reflection of ethnicity.* The basic premises are that «real ethnic distinctions *did* exist, in the well documented multi-ethnic society of twelfth-century BC Palestine. These diverse groups of people knew how they were and how they differed; if we don't yet know, it's up to us to try to find out» (Dever 1997:42). Dever argues that there was a «people» somewhere in the land of Canaan called «Israel» just before 1200 BCE. And they were already well known to Egyptian intelligence, and already well enough established to be considered a threat to security in Egypt's declining Asiatic empire. If *these* «Israelites» were not our hill-country people, then who and where *were* Merneptah's «Israelites»? And how can we account for our hill-country complex if it is *not* «Israelite»? Simple logic suggests connecting the two sets of facts (and they are facts); and if so we have at hand the *textually* attested ethnic label that minimalists demand

(*ibid*:43, author's italics).

2) *Cultural provinces correspond with major ethnic groups or people.* Based on surveys and excavations. One of the salient facts that emerge from these surveys is, in contrast to the continuity in pottery, other material cultural aspects of these villages are innovative and distinctive – what we might call archaeologically «diagnostic traits» or even possibly «*ethnic markers*». These features would include the increasing frequency of rock-hewn *plastered cisterns*; underground stone-lined *silos for grain storage*; *simple iron tools and implements*; *terraces for hillside farming*; and, of course, *the distinctive four-room or courtyard dwelling* described above as the ubiquitous house-form sometimes called, too simplistically, the «*Israelite house*» (Dever 1997:30, my italics).

3) *Cultural continuity indicates ethnic continuity.* The basis in the argument of ethnic continuity is that pottery is always one of our most sensitive media for perceiving cultural continuity or change (Dever 1997:28). According to Dever, «to put it in a nutshell, we have at least as much warrant for using the ethnic term «Israelite» in the early twelfth century BCE for archaeological assemblages as we do for using the terms 'Egyptians', 'Canaanite' or 'Palestine'» (*ibid*:43). It is thus possible to identify ethnic identity based on the pottery remains because it is written in the Bible.

The most significant aspect of the pottery, however, which biblical scholars have been slow to appreciate, is its *striking continuity* with the local, Late Bronze Age ceramic

repertoire. The pottery displays no «foreign» elements, no Egyptian reminiscences, and it is certainly not anything that one could connect with a «nomadic lifestyle» [Ö] This is standard, domestic Canaanite-style pottery, long at home everywhere in western Palestine. The ceramic arguments *alone* would clinch the question of indigenous origins for the settlers of the new highland villages; they came from elsewhere in Canaan (ibid:29–30, author's italics).

According to Dever, the argument is really a simple one, and it rests on the demonstrable *continuity of material culture*. If the basic material culture that defines a people exhibits a tradition of continuous, non-broken development, it is reasonable to argue that the core population remains the same (Dever 1997:44).

4) *The distribution of artefact types that was characteristic of specific tribal groups reflecting where these groups lived at different periods (settlement archaeology)*. Most of the previously mentioned arguments from biblical archaeologists support this interpretative practice. The «facts on the ground» seen from the point of view of settlement archaeology, are what Dever calls one of the most striking stories in the one-hundred-year history of biblical archaeology – the recovery of what he calls «proto-Israel» (Dever 1997:27–28). The most prominent features of the sites where the «proto-Israelites» supposedly lived are the «four-room» or courtyard houses. These structures of various types are related to the Bible, and consequently he has shed light on the actual remains of «earliest Israel». Niels Peter Lemche, however, has a very different approach to problem. Archaeology and text cannot be subsumed under a single formula; the «consequence of this fact ought to be taken seriously. It is no longer legitimate to attempt to 'save the appearances' of certain portions of the Settlement narratives. Rather, it is the very idea Settlement, as it appears in the OT, which must be done away with, for historical reasons» (Lemche 1985:391).

5) *By identifying historically known tribal groups with particular archaeological cultures for the early historical period, it is possible to archaeologically trace them back in time*. Regarding the Bible, William G. Dever states that the holy book is

not «history», but «*His*» story – the dramatic account of God's miraculous dealings with a particular people designated to become his chosen. The Bible is almost exclusively a sacred history, or «salvation-history», written as it was [...] from a divine

perspective, since its authors claim to be inspired by God. Thus the Bible is scarcely interested in humans, that is, historical explanations. It intends to tell us not so much how or when ancient Israel originated, but *why*»

(Dever 1997:20).

The historical method is unquestionable, and as Dever himself puts it, «given what we have seen of the limitations of the Bible as an adequate source for history-writing, it seems obvious that an external, less tendentious source of information would be desirable» (ibid:21). But they did not find another written or extra-biblical source of this kind, and of course, the source became archaeology, «which has brought to light a mass of factual data about the long-lost biblical world» (ibid.).

6) *Racist and chauvinist interpretation in favour of nationalistic aims and needs.* Patricia Smith (1998:73) argues, based on physical anthropological studies, that the

extent and timing of changes in the skull, mandible and teeth have not all taken place at the same time, and in some periods, notably in the MB II and Roman-Byzantine periods, a sudden change and apparent reversal has taken place in the cranial but not dental parameters. The long-term trends can be related to long-term selective pressures, that have acted to reduce skeletal robusticity and tooth size, whereas the sudden changes seen in MB II and Jewish populations indicate the introduction of *a different population group*.

MB II (1750–1550 BC) is by coincidence the period when the Exodus, according to orthodox Christianity, supposedly took place. If skeletal features correlate to an ethnic group, and if it is possible to distinguish different ethnic groups based on the skeletons, then the ethnic groups must represent «races». From a biological point of view, genetics tend not to speak of races for two reasons. Firstly, there has always been so much interbreeding of human populations that it is meaningless to talk about fixed boundaries between «races». Secondly, the distribution of hereditary physical traits does not follow clear boundaries; this means that there is often a greater variation within a «racial» group than there are systematic variations between two groups (Eriksen 1993:4).

The consequences of the integration of Christian orthodoxy, nationalism, archaeology, theology and politics have been devastating. By the biblical archaeological use

of the cultural historical paradigm, the Palestinians are «a people without history – or deprived of that history by the discourse of biblical studies – they become unimportant, irrelevant, and finally non-existent (ibid:46) [...]. The discourse of biblical studies has steadfastly refused to acknowledge that the construction of the past is a political act. Biblical scholars and archaeologists have sought to escape to the heaven of objectivity effectively ignoring, or even denying, the context in which they work and the contexts in which is received and read» (Whitelam 1997:128).

CONCLUSION

In a multi-ethnic society the collective uniting feature is the future, not the past, because the past is a major source of struggle and conflict (Eriksen 1996). The problem is how the Palestinians can create their own past without using the interpretative practice as the biblical scholars do. One way of doing this is by writing the history of the peoples the biblical scholars have neglected to write. Thus, it is possible to avoid a retroactive imperialism (Davies 1992:31), but rather to construct a democratic past. Only a plural past can give legitimacy to a plural present. If archaeology matters, then narratives of every group of humans in history are equally important. If one group, period or process is given preference by the state, then it is important to trace, illuminate and demolish the ideological and political motifs. Biblical archaeologists argue in the same manner as Kossinna and Nazi-archaeologists did. This archaeological production of knowledge of prehistoric cultures is constructed by biblical archaeologists and used by Israelis to legitimise the occupation of land and property in the Middle East. This is a historical paradox. The Palestinians are without history and land, excluded by Israel in a similar way as- and for the same reasons as the Nazis archaeologically legitimised the extermination of the Jews. Based on history, archaeology, common principles for nation-states and indigenous rights, the Palestinians have equal rights to territory and land as the Israelis. If archaeology and the Bible cannot contribute to this goal, but rather stimulate and encourage nationalism, chauvinism, political misuse, struggle and war, society is better off without both archaeologists and biblical scholars.

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