

Roman sites, which are made necessary by Israel's continuing construction boom. Israel is also a major center of prehistoric research. Over the past 2 decades, Israeli prehistorians have uncovered tantalizing evidence—at sites such as the caves of Mount Carmel and those in the Jordan River Valley—that the Levant may have been a major corridor for movement of early humans out of Africa. And ongoing excavations at Sha'ar Hagolan, just south of the Sea of Galilee, have uncovered one of the Near East's largest Neolithic settlements, which was a center of extraordinary artistic activity (see p. 35).

But, try as they might to distance themselves from religious influences,

many of Israel's leading archaeologists have recently been caught up in new and sometimes fractious debates over the proper relationship between archaeology and biblical scholarship. They have come under attack from a group of European biblical scholars called "biblical minimalists," who assert that figures such as Kings David and Solomon may never have existed and that the sprawling Israelite kingdom, with its capital in Jerusalem, they are supposed to have ruled was not a historical reality. These scholars have taken archaeologists to task for being guided too much by the Bible in their research (see next story).

To some archaeologists, this controversy

is regrettable. "We fought so hard to make archaeology here a respectable discipline and to free it from these kinds of emotional issues," says William Dever, an archaeologist at the University of Arizona in Tucson. "And now we are back in the middle of it again." Yet it may just be that, when excavating in the Holy Land, politics and the Bible simply go with the territory. "The power of religious and nationalistic symbols should not be underestimated," says Steven Rosen, an archaeologist at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva. "They will continue to play a role in Israeli archaeology, just as they do in most archaeologies around the world."

—MICHAEL BALTER

## THE HOLY LAND

### THE BIBLE

# Baedeker's Guide, or Just Plain 'Trouble'?

Despite efforts to focus on scientific questions, excavators in the Holy Land continue to be embroiled in debates on the Bible's historical value

**JERUSALEM AND TEL AVIV**—Once upon a time, a great wise king named Solomon ruled over Israel. The wealth and power of his kingdom knew no equal. He built massive fortifications at strategic cities such as Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer and raised up an enormous gold-laden temple at Jerusalem. Solomon had at least 700 wives and 300 concubines, including a pharaoh's daughter, and carried on a brief dalliance with the Queen of Sheba. As for his legendary wisdom, "All the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind." How do we know? The Bible tells us so. Unfortunately, however, there is no other direct evidence that this great king ever lived. Biblical scholars have dated Solomon's reign to the 10th century B.C. But if the Egyptians were aware of this mighty ruler on their eastern flank, they did not mention him in any of their numerous surviving 10th century inscriptions. Despite more than 150 years of archaeological excavations in the Holy Land, no trace of Solomon has ever been unearthed.

This and other contradictions between what the biblical texts say and what excavators have dug up has made most archaeologists working here wary of using the Bible as any kind of field guide. In fact, over recent decades archaeologists in Israel have been steadily shifting away from answering questions posed by the Bible to questions of trade and economy, technology, and social issues in ancient societies. On the other hand, it is hard for archaeologists to ignore the Bible as a historical text. Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethlehem,

Hebron, Gaza, Ashkelon—all of these modern cities were also backdrops for vivid episodes in the Old and New Testaments, and all contain traces of those ancient times. And now, despite years of trying to keep the Bible at arm's length, archaeologists find themselves on the other side of the argument, accused by a new school of biblical scholars of having become biased by the holy book. The result has been a lively and sometimes acrimonious debate among, and between, archaeologists and biblical scholars. Some argue that archaeology and biblical studies should divorce completely and go their separate ways. Others counter that such a drastic step would cut archaeologists off from one of the few historical sources they have.

## The Bible and the spade

Although archaeologists working in Israel today struggle to keep their distance from religious and political questions, that has not always been the case. Until the mid-20th century, most major excavations in Palestine were carried out by Christian scholars out to prove the biblical stories were literally true or at least to put them into a historical context. Foremost among them was the American William F. Albright, who

worked in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s and whose name is most closely associated with what came to be called "biblical archaeology." With the establishment of Israel in 1948, archaeology in Palestine took on a distinctly nationalistic form. The first generation of Israeli archaeologists, many of whom were ardent Zionists, began digging up ancient Israelite sites with feverish enthusiasm. The most prominent of these pioneers, the late Yigael Yadin—the commander of Jewish forces during the Israeli war of independence, who later became a professor of archaeology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem—pursued an explicit agenda of searching for Jewish roots in Palestine. In the 1950s and 1960s, Yadin excavated ancient sites such as Hazor and Masada (site of the Jewish zealots' last stand against the Ro-



**When Solomon met Sheba.** Did Yul Brynner and Gina Lollobrigida play fictional characters?



mans) with, as he once put it, “the Bible in one hand and the spade in the other.”

But beginning in the 1970s, a new generation of Israeli archaeologists began to emerge. Having grown up in a country now more confident about its permanent survival despite ongoing Arab hostility, and influenced by advances in archaeological science in the United States and Europe, these excavators were much less inclined to allow religious or nationalistic concerns to determine their research directions.

“Israeli archaeology has moved considerably beyond the Bible and the spade,” comments Steven Rosen, an archaeologist at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva. “It would be a rare Israeli excavation today that would include the Bible as a reference book in its dig house.” And William Dever, an archaeologist at the University of Arizona in Tucson who is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of scientific archaeology in Palestine, declares: “We wrote the obituary for biblical archaeology, and nobody mourns its passing today.”

### The Bible as history?

But debate over the influence of the Bible on archaeology was not quite dead. It was brought to life again in 1992 with the publication of a book by Philip Davies, a biblical scholar at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, entitled *In Search of “Ancient Israel.”* Davies, one of the leading lights in a group often dubbed “biblical minimalists,” argued that the so-called United Monarchy founded by King David, and greatly expanded by his son Solomon, is a literary invention by biblical authors writing hundreds of years after the purported events and is not reflected in the archaeological record. Davies contended that there is no more archaeological evidence for the reign of David and Solomon than for Adam and Eve or Noah and his Ark. Most provocatively, Davies suggested that without the influence of the Bible, archaeologists might never have



**Corroboration?** This Assyrian inscription depicts Israelite King Jehu (center of panel) kneeling before Assyrian King Shalmaneser III. A similar episode appears in the Bible.

dig up in excavations with the biblical texts, if at all. Tel Aviv University archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, who says he regularly assigns Davies’s book to his students, comments that the minimalist position represents the latest phase in “a gradual pullback, a withdrawal from considering the biblical texts as historical. The question is where to stop—that is what the debate is about.”

Many archaeologists say the minimalists have already gone too far. Amihai Mazar, an archaeologist at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, believes that if the Bible is jettisoned, “we would have to dump into the garbage pile all the scholarly literature of the last 100 years relating the Bible to archaeology and vice versa.” Mazar and others argue, for example, that Solomon’s glorious reign cannot be completely dismissed as biblical mythology. The locations of Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer have been identified with a high degree of confidence. And Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian inscriptions mention a number of Solomon’s royal successors.

Moreover, in 1993, at a site identified as the biblical city of Dan in northern Israel,

identified any of their findings from the 10th century B.C. as belonging to an early state called Israel. In other words, Davies claimed, the unreliable biblical texts were introducing a major bias into archaeological interpretation.

Davies’s book—along with similar arguments by University of Copenhagen biblical scholar Thomas Thompson and others—has triggered heated debates among archaeologists. “This book is what started the whole thing,” says Arizona’s Dever. At issue is the extent to which archaeologists should attempt to correlate what they

archaeologists dug up an inscription referring to the “House of David.” After years of fierce debate among archaeologists and biblical scholars over the significance of this inscription, most doubters have now conceded that some sort of dynasty founded by a king named David existed here in ancient times, even though they still don’t believe this dynasty had anywhere near the grandeur described in the Bible.

Other archaeologists, however, believe the minimalists have some valid points. “We have to completely separate biblical research on one hand and archaeology on the other,” says Tel Aviv University archaeologist David Ussishkin. Together with Finkelstein, Ussishkin has recently concluded that monumental architecture at Megiddo and other sites attributed to Solomon and interpreted as evidence for the United Monarchy dates from later periods—research that is often cited by the minimalists as support for their position (see p. 31).

Archaeologists working in the Holy Land are now struggling to define a middle way. “There are those who see the Bible as a religious document and nothing but trouble,” says Dever. “But you must take the biblical texts as seriously as you would any other text. The Bible is the most extensive literary source for the Iron Age in Palestine, so the question is not whether to use it, but how.” Finkelstein, despite his sympathy with some of the minimalists’ points, agrees: “In the more enlightened circles of biblical studies, there is a deep knowledge that the Bible is composed



**Telltale pots.** These “collared rim jars” are characteristic of early Israelite settlements.

from different sources written at different dates and was edited and reedited many times. And yet I consider some of the biblical material to be historical writing,” he says. “People say, ‘How can you trust some parts of it and not others?’ But that is what we should be doing, sorting out what is history and what is not.”

—MICHAEL BALTER

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