

***The Bible Unearthed* in the Context of the Tenth Century (BCE) Debate**

A Review of Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2000)

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Archaeology's "New Vision," or Myopia?

[1] Is the biblical chronicle of the monarchy of kings David and Solomon merely the stuff of romanticized, ideological legend, like some Camelot of the Ancient Near East? Or are the ruinous city walls and gates uncovered by archaeologists at Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer the very fortifications ascribed to Solomon in passages such as 1 Kings 9:15? Since its recent publication, *The Bible Unearthed* continues to provoke discussion in popular circles over the reliability of the Bible as a witness to history (Trible; Miller). Finkelstein is currently director of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University and co-director of the university's excavations at Megiddo. Silberman, a journalist by profession, is director of historical interpretation for the Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation in Belgium. Following a brief overview of *The Bible Unearthed*, the present article will test its controversial assertions concerning the period of the united monarchy. Going behind the lines, so to speak, it will frame and evaluate the current debate among archaeologists over the architectural landscape of the Levant during the tenth century BCE and conclude that on the basis of both evidence and argument the conventional model remains largely intact as supported by the archaeological record.

[2] Finkelstein and Silberman's stated purpose is twofold: "to separate history from [biblical] legend," and "to share the most recent archaeological insights - still largely unknown outside scholarly circles." Although some of the claims put forth in the book may come as a surprise to a general readership, many of its assertions are familiar to the present generation of scholars already familiar with the various methods - literary, historical, and archaeological - which have challenged traditional notions concerning the historicity of the patriarchs, the nature of the Exodus, and the scope of the conquest of Canaan. Treading boldly upon what for most biblical scholars and archaeologists has been fairly reliable historical ground, however, *The Bible Unearthed* ushers its general readership into the arena of more than a decade of ongoing scholarly controversy concerning whether or not David and Solomon actually reigned as kings over the powerful and expansive, tenth-century BCE monarchy described in the Bible, or whether historically they were simply "warrior chieftains" operating from a well-defended mountain stronghold situated in a sparsely settled and undeveloped Judah.

[3] The vantage point Finkelstein and Silberman adopt for the history of biblical Israel is the reign of King Josiah, the seventh-century BCE religious and political reformer championed by the biblical author known to scholars as the Deuteronomistic historian. While scholarship is in general agreement that this historical anchor holds for the shaping of the book of Deuteronomy,

as well as for the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, the authors boldly assert that the narrative tradition of the rest of the Torah came into being during that time and that its formation was “uniquely suited to further the religious reform and territorial ambitions of Judah during the momentous concluding decades of the seventh century BCE” (23)

[4] Following a brief introduction about the Bible and some of the methods used for understanding it, *The Bible Unearthed* launches into the quest for the historical ancestors (Chapter 1) and addresses the question “Did the Exodus Really Happen?” (Chapter 2). Here the authors reaffirm the long-accepted silence of the archaeological record on these subjects and set about identifying clues in the biblical text, anachronisms in particular, which appear to the authors to reflect a seventh-century setting. One should keep in mind that the fluidity with which ancient texts were transmitted often betrays a liberal amount of editorial license but that this alone does not provide sufficient reason to reject out of hand the greater antiquity of foundational narrative traditions. To think otherwise is to be naive, for real national and religious myths, rooted as they are in what phenomenologists of religion call an experience of the sacred, have a life of their own and are not simply *invented*.

[5] In Chapter 3 the conquest of Canaan is similarly treated. On the one hand, there is little here that is new. Bible readers have observed for centuries the glaring discrepancy between Joshua’s all-Israel *blitzkrieg* campaign through Canaan and the no less ideological account of a post-Joshua, piecemeal compromise settlement in the book of Judges. On the other hand, what is different is that the authors of *The Bible Unearthed* find the territorial and ideological aspirations of the biblical account to be mirrored in the eyes of the Deuteronomistic historian standing in the shadow of good King Josiah.

[6] Chapter 4 discusses the emergence of the Israelites from the perspective of social archaeology, a subject about which Finkelstein has written extensively. This sets the stage for discussion of the united monarchy and the tenth century BCE (Chapter 5) and the focus of this review. The remaining chapters cover the events leading up to the literary and historical convergence of Josiah’s reign, as well as the reappropriation of biblical history seen through the filter of the Exile and restoration. These chapters will not concern us, except to say that the implications of the authors’ demotion of Solomon from king to tribal chieftain revises history in such a way as to accord the northern kingdom of Israel, under the Omride dynasty (884-842 BCE), the title of “Israel’s Forgotten First Kingdom.” The real question here is to what extent this view truly represents, to use the authors’ words, “archaeology’s new vision of Israel?”

Unearthing *The Bible Unearthed*

[7] Scholars challenging the traditional view of tenth-century BCE Israel argue that the biblical account of the united monarchy is hardly more than some ideological myth superimposed upon Israel’s past from post-exilic or even Hellenistic times (Garbini; Davies; Thompson 1992, 1999; Lemche; compare Shanks). These so-called “biblical minimalists” claim support for their assertions, albeit selectively, from the archaeological record. However, Finkelstein becomes the first well-known archaeologist to enter the contest actively on their behalf. From the perspective of archaeology, the primary issue *in nuce* is whether or not the traditional chronology established for the stratigraphical sequence of Iron Age Israel is valid, or whether, as some have charged, archaeologists have simply placed too much reliance on the biblical account. Crucial to the investigation is whether or not one finds at the tenth-century BCE level the kind of monumental structures that would have represented a centralized political entity’s administrative, ideological,

and religious presence. There is also the question of just whose ideological and administrative presence is being represented at levels where such structures have been found.

[8] From the standpoint of Syro-Palestinian archaeology, the chronological span of Iron Age stratigraphy is draped upon two historically reliable but rather temporally distant pegs: the withdrawal of Twentieth Dynasty Egypt from Canaan in the late-twelfth century BCE, well-attested in material remains and extra-biblical literary records, and the Assyrian campaigns of the late eighth century BCE, witnessed by thick layers of destruction left by Assyrian forces. The absence of any verifiably historical anchors in the nearly 400-year interim, with the possible exception of the conquest of ca. 925 BCE (biblical Shishak?), has made ascertaining absolute chronology so far elusive; it allows wide berth for such a debate over tenth-century material remains to occur. There have been a few important, isolated finds, such as the Mesha Stone from Dibon, the Shoshenq stele at Megiddo, and the recently discovered Aramaic Stele fragment from Tel Dan which bears a reference to the House of David (Biran and Naveh 1993, 1995), however none of these artifacts were recovered from their primary contexts. Consequently, they are of no real value for establishing absolute chronology for the Iron Age.

[9] In 1996 Finkelstein published the first of several articles which seriously challenge the traditional chronology of Iron Age stratigraphy in the Levant. Reversing his earlier, more traditional convictions, Finkelstein now claims that recent archaeological evidence leads him to the conclusion that “the chronological framework of much of the Iron Age (11th-9th centuries BCE) is shaky” (1999b: 35-36). In place of the traditional chronological sequencing of Iron Age strata Finkelstein proposes an alternative chronology which, he affirms, is “no less appealing and historically sound” as the traditional scheme (1996: 178). According to Finkelstein, sites conventionally dated to the tenth century, such as Megiddo Strata VA-IVB, Arad Stratum XI, and Beer-sheeba Stratum V, should be moved forward into the ninth century BCE. This shift in chronology at these important sites creates a problem in that the comparative stratigraphy for a large number of other sites would be seriously affected. What this means for those with an eye toward the Bible is that monumental assemblages, most notably city walls, ashlar palaces, and/or six-chambered gates at sites such as Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer traditionally attributed to the Solomonic building campaign mentioned in 1 Kings 9:15, would not be testaments to the United Monarchy at all, but the product of a ninth-century BCE fortification carried out under the rule of the Omride dynasty.

[10] So what is the basis for the revised chronology? One aspect of it is Finkelstein’s assertion that excavators have relied far too heavily on the biblical record for ascertaining absolute chronology for the tenth century BCE. He views his involvement in the current debate as “part of a quest to emancipate Iron Age archaeology from Bible archaeology” (1998: 167) and cites more than a few instances in which archaeologists have uncritically accepted the Bible as a reliable historical witness. To be sure, Yadin’s original dating of Hazor Stratum X, although based on comparative stratigraphy and pottery considerations, was, using Yadin’s word, “clinched” by the witness of 1 Kings 9:15 (Yadin: 135; quoted in Finkelstein 1999a: 57). Although Finkelstein may be correct in his assertion that some archaeologists may place too much reliance on the Bible as an accurate historical source, like many of his revisionist biblical history counterparts he himself is hardly free of this charge and freely cites the Bible as an authenticating source whenever it supports his perspective, especially in his references to the Omride building campaigns (e.g. 1 Kings 16:24 and 21:1).

[11] Polemics aside, the scientific basis for the Low Chronology begins an earlier study by Finkelstein (1995) which concludes that Philistine Monochrome pottery, conventionally dated to ca. 1175-1150 BCE, was introduced into southern Canaan only after the withdrawal of Twentieth Dynasty Egypt, not during the waning years of the Egyptian presence which the generally accepted Albright-Alt model holds. Pointing to the absence of Philistine Monochrome and Bichrome sherds at Lachish Stratum VI and Tel Sera Stratum IX, both of which attest to a Twentieth Dynasty Egyptian occupation, Finkelstein asserts that Philistine occupation in the region must have occurred only after the Egyptian presence had withdrawn. Thus, he says, the date for Philistine Monochrome pottery should be revised to ca. 1135-1100 BCE or later. Consequently, the presence of later developing Bichrome Philistine pottery in southern Canaan should be lowered from late-twelfth, early-eleventh centuries BCE to late-eleventh, early-tenth centuries BCE (1995: 224; 1996: 179-80; 1999b: 38-39). This revision in the dating of Philistine pottery produces a kind of domino effect that pushes the traditional relative chronology of Iron Age stratigraphy - including, of course, the tenth century BCE - ahead some 50 to 100 years. It challenges recent socio-archaeological studies which support a Philistine settlement concentrated in the coastal cities of the Pentapolis contemporaneous with an active Egyptian presence surrounding it (see, for example, Stager). As a supporting argument, Finkelstein adds that revising the date of Philistine Bichrome pottery to near the turn of the tenth century BCE effectively fills the ninth-century gap apparent in the stratigraphy of a number of southern sites including Tel Mor, Tell Beit Mirsim, Ashdod, and Tel Haror (1995: 224; 1996: 182).

[12] Turning northward Finkelstein applies his Low Chronology scheme to Megiddo, a site which he co-directs with David Ussishkin and Baruch Halpern. On the basis of his views concerning Philistine Bichrome pottery, Finkelstein lowers the date of Megiddo Stratum VIA to the tenth century BCE, thrusting Megiddo Strata VA-IVB - traditionally accepted as the tenth-century BCE, Solomonic city - forward into the ninth century. In support of this scheme Finkelstein draws comparisons with the royal compound at Jezreel, which excavators Ussishkin and Woodhead posit had been constructed by Ahab and destroyed during Jehu's *coup d'état*. Based on Zimhoni's study of the ceramic assemblages there (1992), the ostensibly ninth-century types were deemed by Finkelstein to be "somewhat similar" to Megiddo Strata VA-IVB, a position Amihai Mazar calls "flimsy" (158).

[13] Mazar was among the first to issue a direct response to Finkelstein's proposed Low Chronology scheme. Following the model of Philistine settlement in Canaan put forth by Stager, Mazar sharply criticizes Finkelstein's rejection of the possibility that the use of Philistine and Egyptian ware could overlap in various places throughout Canaan, maintaining that demarcations in the use of daily ware would be ethnographically conditioned and not uniformly sequential. The vast amount of Monochrome ware produced in Philistine cities like Ashdod and Ekron-Tel Mique is far less-attested in cities outside the Pentapolis where well established indigenous traditions would reasonably continue (158). The Philistine presence in southern Canaan need not have awaited the complete withdrawal of Egypt, but established itself along the coast as Egyptian control of the region was diminishing. Mazar cites substantial supporting evidence, most notably the ceramic finds at Beth Shan which have yielded imported Philistine-type pottery sherds recovered from the last two phases of Egyptian occupation.

[14] Turning now to Hazor, an extremely significant site in its own right and all but ignored in Finkelstein's 1996 study, one finds a telling witness of the effects of the Low Chronology upon northern stratigraphy, for application of Finkelstein's scheme at this site tightly compresses the

chronology of its stratigraphy against the firm, latter anchor of the Assyrian conquest (late-eighth century BCE). The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the absolute historical chronology of Hazor Strata VI and V, based as it is on reliable pottery assessments and the availability of Assyrian textual evidence, is not in dispute. Thus the real pressure of the Low Chronology scheme is found in the compression of phases and strata lying between and inclusive of Stratum VII, which builds upon a late-ninth century BCE destruction layer (attributed either to Hazael or to Joash/Jeroboam II, depending upon the chronology one adopts), and Stratum X, traditionally dated to the latter tenth century (see Figure 1).

[15] Taking up the rejoinder to Finkelstein's proposal, Hazor excavator Amnon Ben-Tor and Doron Ben-Ami reaffirm Iron Age Hazor's stratigraphy and chronology as established by Yigael Yadin during the 1950s and 1960s. Renewed excavations carried out by Ben-Tor in Areas A and B support Yadin's stratification sequence, namely four strata (X-VII), with two phases each for Stratum X and Stratum IX (3). These latter four phases are sandwiched between the Iron I pits of Strata XII-XI and a large pillared building rooted in Stratum VIII. The well-known casemate wall and six-chambered gate complex, traditionally attributed to Solomon, is associated with the earliest of these phases (Xb). On the basis of detailed ceramic analysis recovered from sealed loci located immediately above the Iron I strata, the excavators reaffirm a tenth-century date for the corresponding monumental assemblages of Stratum X.

[16] Ben-Tor and Ben-Ami's initial response to Finkelstein's proposal was based on a number of general observations. First, there is the problem of arbitrarily assigning Iron Age II pottery either to the tenth or the ninth century, due to the now generally accepted fact that the real transition from Iron Age IIA to Iron Age IIB occurs not in the closing decades of the tenth century BCE as originally held, but in the mid-ninth century BCE (ca. 850-840 BCE) (Aharoni and Amiran, cited in Ben-Tor and Ben-Ami: 30). Second, echoing Mazar, varied and different pottery types often co-exist at close range, casting a certain amount of doubt on the reliability of short-term comparative ceramic analysis. Third, Ben-Tor and Ben-Ami caution against the dubious association of Megiddo VA-IVB with the Jezreel enclosure, based as it is on the latter's poor state of preservation and the lack of any sealed loci from which reliable ceramic determinations could be made. Fourth and most important, the Low Chronology creates the problem of compressing strata at certain sites into an incredibly brief time span - at Hazor, for example, where six strata and roughly ten sub-phases would have to be squeezed into a period of about 120 years, allowing only a 20 to 25-year average interval for each phase. This problem would hold for a number of other sites as well; Tel Rehov, for example, where, if Finkelstein's low chronology scheme is correct, two strata and a number of phases and sub-phases would be compressed into roughly half of the ninth century BCE (see Mazar and Camp).

[17] Faced now with the challenges presented by Ben-Tor and Ben-Ami's reaffirmation of Yadin's chronology at Hazor and the problem of "dense stratigraphy," Finkelstein renews and defends his confidence in the absolute dating of the royal enclosure at Jezreel. He had already lowered the chronology of Megiddo Strata VA-IVB on the basis of recent pottery studies at Jezreel, most notably a 1992 study by Zimhoni, and based on a more recent study by Zimhoni (1997) now claims that Hazor Stratum X, like Megiddo VA-IVB, is roughly contemporary with it. (Incidentally, the lack of precision in dating pottery to the late-tenth, early-ninth century, may be illustrated by the fact that a recent comparative study of the pottery of Hazor, Yoqneam, and Megiddo conducted by Zarzeki-Peleg, effectively challenges Zimhoni's conclusions, so crucial for Finkelstein's scheme.) Nevertheless, Finkelstein stands firm on the ninth-century dating of

the Jezreel ceramic assemblage and attempts further to connect Hazor Stratum X to the Jezreel enclosure on the basis of apparent similarities in layout and architecture. As for the problem of excessively dense stratigraphy resulting from the Low Chronology scheme, Finkelstein dismisses this out of hand as simply the result of struggles over Hazor between Israel and Aram Damascus. He views the tenth century BCE as a time of Aramaean territorial and political formation, followed in the ninth century by a period of Omride Israelite expansion (represented by Hazor Strata X-IX) that ends with the conquests of Hazael of Aram Damascus (1999a: 65).

[18] Ben-Tor challenges these latest assertions on a number of counts. He raises again the issue of the poor condition of Jezreel's architecture, including its four-chambered gate and attached casemate wall, which he asserts bear no similarity to Hazor's six-chambered gate and "very different" casemate wall. He challenges the reliability of pottery dating due to Jezreel's poor state of preservation and observes that, in fact, no sealed loci exist at Jezreel to provide reliable pottery dating; even if pottery from sealed loci were available, it would not be a reliable indicator for distinguishing between late tenth century and early ninth-century occupation. Finally, Ben-Tor rejects Finkelstein's explanation for Hazor's dense stratigraphy, attributed to a tight series of Aramaean campaigns, by observing that Tel Dan, only some 20 km to the north, lies much closer to Aram Damascus yet has fewer strata in evidence.

[19] The Aramaean presence in and around northern Israel is a subject of growing interest among archaeologists and historians, but so far the only explicit archaeological witness to Aramaean activity in the region is the fragmentary stele inscription at Tel Dan, which, as mentioned above, was discovered in 1993 outside its primary context. From an archaeological perspective, the Aramaeans are, in Ben-Tor's words, "an invisible entity, since they leave no discernible fingerprints" (12). In the absence of any datable archaeological indicators, the Aramaean factor cannot be used to argue for either chronological scheme, as most any ninth-century destruction level in the north may be attributed to an Aramaean conquest. Thus, Finkelstein's Low Chronology would attribute the destruction of Hazor Strata IX to Hazael, while Yadin and Ben-Tor would posit that the destruction was caused by Ben-Hadad I. The latter assumption is based solely on 1 Kings 15:20, which Finkelstein is forced to reject. This he does, arguing that the Bible's description of the campaign "reflects the reality of the later campaign of Tiglath-pileser III, and thus its historicity is questionable" (1999a: 59).

[20] In assessing the current debate, we have already raised a number of points which do not favor Finkelstein's assertion that his alternative approach to the chronology of Iron Age Israel is "no less appealing and historically sound than the generally accepted one" (1996: 178). First, his efforts appear to be tainted by the self-appointed "quest to emancipate Iron Age archaeology from biblical archaeology" (1998: 167), which does not hinder him from finding biblical support for such events as the destruction of Jezreel or choosing selectively among various Aramaean activities mentioned in the Bible. In fact, at times it appears that Finkelstein is being driven more by his own conclusions than by a methodologically sound interest in building upon a growing body of evidence. In light of the efforts of the Copenhagen school and others in making use (albeit selective) of the findings of archaeology in supporting their claims about the nature of the United Monarchy, one may appreciate the irony of Mazar's recent observation that perhaps Finkelstein's interpretation of the data has been "inspired by some current trends in historical writing" (164).

[21] Another critique of the Low Chronology, then, is that it appears to be based on a very narrow consideration of available data. Drawing assumptions about Philistine pottery by

focusing on a few southern sites, Finkelstein ignores the presence of boldly demarcated pottery distribution elsewhere. Mazar cites as example the large quantity of Bichrome ware recovered at Megiddo Stratum VIA, but lacking at a contemporaneous level at Beth Shan (S-2) (158). Moreover, it seems naive to suppose, as Finkelstein apparently does, that pottery use and development would be sequentially uniform across a broad area and that clearly defined socio-political and cultural boundaries would not result in variations in the type and useful life of daily pottery.

[22] Next, the resulting shift in the chronology of corresponding strata at other sites creates more problems than it solves. In order to maintain the proposed chronology Finkelstein is forced to stamp out fires; those he cannot stamp out are simply ignored. Case in point, Arad Stratum XII, which Finkelstein accepts as being the city conquered by Shoshenq I ca. 925 BCE yields pottery assemblages contemporaneous with those of southern sites such as Qasile IX-VII, Lachish V, Batash IV, and others, which the Low Chronology scheme has pushed forward into the ninth century BCE (Mazar: 161). It makes more sense to retain the correspondence of these other sites, tied as they are to the reasonably firm anchor of Arad XII. Finally, Finkelstein's assertion that the Low Chronology closes an apparent gap in the ninth-century BCE stratigraphy of the south appears to be nothing more than a solution in search of a problem, as the "thin stratigraphy" of this period is reasonably attributed to a continuation in the use of pottery and not a missing century at all, as Mazar points out (163).

[23] Thus, as it stands, proponents of the conventional chronology appear to be putting forth the strongest and most cogent arguments. However, having said this it should also be kept in mind that the challenge to the conventional model Finkelstein presents is constructive in that it forces archaeologists to "dig a little deeper," to demonstrate scientifically what may have been too easily accepted as true on the basis of an uncritical reading of the Bible. It has also invited further discussion of the Aramaean question of the ninth-century BCE north, as well as the process of state formation in the Levant. In any event, until indisputable epigraphical evidence can be found *in situ*, the debate over the tenth-century socio-political and architectural landscape will likely continue. In the meantime, continued scientific inquiry, including such things as Carbon 14 analysis, is currently underway at a number of crucial sites.

Conclusion

[24] Contrary to the claims of *The Bible Unearthed*, the Bible's witness to the presence of kingdoms in and around tenth-century Israel is based on the reality of institutional-type structures. One cannot easily dismiss this as simply the projection of a golden age superimposed upon history from some later date. Monumental public architecture at sites such as Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, and Beth Shan witness to at least some sort of centralized administrative interest - albeit perhaps in some formative stage - operating in tenth-century Israel and argues against Finkelstein's assertion that the northern kingdom of Israel "would emerge [in the ninth century BCE] as the first real, full blown state in Iron Age Palestine" (1996: 185). The history of this region must be seen as a process of continuing expansion of political entities through conquest, annexation, and consolidation. By the tenth century small city states led by warrior chieftains, perhaps something of the sort we find in the book of Judges, began coalescing into petty kingdoms which would gradually develop into the larger kingdoms. However, even these mighty tenth-century kingdoms would themselves come to be swallowed up by empires, those

bigger fish who effectively marshaled that Ancient Near Eastern practice of expansion and development through conquest and consolidation on a much greater level.

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Figure 1

Comparison of Traditional and Low Chronologies for Iron Age Hazor *

<u>Stratum</u>	<u>Traditional Chronology</u>	<u>Low Chronology</u>
X	10 th C, Solomonic	Early 9 th C, Omride
IX	Late 10 th , early 9 th C, Israelite	First half of 9 th C, Omride
Destruction	885 BCE, Ben-Hadad	835 BCE, Hazael
VIII	First half 9 th C, Israelite	Late 9 th , Aramaean
VII	Second half 9 th C, Israelite	End of 9 th C, Aramaean
Destruction	ca. 810, Hazael	ca. 800, Joash/Jeroboam II **
VI	Early 8 th C, Jeroboam II	Early 8 th C, Jeroboam II **
Destruction	ca. 760, Earthquake	ca. 760, Earthquake
V	Mid-8 th C, Israelite	Mid-8 th C, Israelite
Destruction	732, Tiglath-pileser III	732, Tiglath-pileser III

* Adapted from I. Finkelstein (1999a: 65).

** In order to support his Low Chronology Finkelstein attributes the destruction of Stratum VII to Israelite expansion in which Hazor is wrested away from Assyrian control.