ARCHAEOLOGY VS. THE BIBLE

A Reluctant Israeli Public Grapples With What Scholarship Reveals About the Old Testament's Version of History

By HAIM WATZMAN
Jerusalem

"If Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David aren't proven, how am I supposed to live with that?" The agonized question came from the crowded back row of an auditorium at Ben-Gurion University, during a conference titled "Has the Biblical Period Disappeared?" It expressed the shiver that went down Israel's collective spine at the end of last year, as puzzled scholars saw Israel's lay population jerked into awareness of the last two decades of biblical archaeological and historical research.

Just as Israelis have had to reconsider their recent past, in light of revisionist historical works, they also are finding themselves facing the myths of their antiquity with unprecedented intensity. Unlike the historians of modern times, much of whose work is based on new revelations from previously closed archives and papers, the archaeologists who have given the Israeli public its latest cold shower are presenting established scholarship, some of it dating from the past two or three decades, and some of it dating back a century.

But like some of the revisionist historians, they are presenting their research in a provocative -- some would say even incendiary -- way, explicitly aimed at revising the nature of Israeli identity.

The chill that produced the question at Ben-Gurion University was set off by one of Israeli archaeology's leading biblical minimalists -- a label attached by their colleagues to those who think that very little in the Bible's historical sections is true. The Tel Aviv University archaeologist Ze'ev Herzog began the flurry with a cover story in the weekend magazine of the October 29, 1999, issue of *Ha'aretz*, the national daily newspaper.

"This is what archaeologists have learned from their excavations in the Land of Israel: the Israelites were never in Egypt, did not wander in the desert, did not conquer the land in a military campaign and did not pass it on to the 12 tribes of Israel. Perhaps even harder to swallow is the fact that the united monarchy of David and Solomon, which is described by the Bible as a regional power, was at most a small tribal kingdom," he wrote.

Why does that make Israelis shiver? It is not, primarily, a religious issue. The questioner at Ben-Gurion University was not an Orthodox Jew. He was an older man, by his appearance and mode of speech a representative of Israel's founding generation, one of those who had fought to establish a modern Jewish state in 1948 after 2,000 years of exile. For such Israelis, the Bible is not a religious document. Rather, it fills the place held by the Declaration of Independence in the United States: It is the defining document of Jewish nationhood.

Despite being aware that both textual and historical scholarship have shown that the Bible was written by multiple authors and put in its final form long after the events it describes, the average secular Israeli, who studies the Bible in school as part of the required curriculum, has grown up with a vague impression that the archaeological finds, from the beginning of biblical archaeology at the start of this century to the present time, have provided a consistent stream of evidence for the fundamental truth of the biblical historical narrative.

But what if the artifacts turned up in the field over the last century -- the pottery, the ancient buildings and cities, the inscriptions and documents -- instead fail to provide evidence that much of the biblical story ever happened, or actually contradict it? That is precisely Mr. Herzog's position.

He ended his article by expressing puzzlement that his conclusions, representing, he claimed, the consensus of biblical archaeological and historical scholarship for the last 15 years or so, had failed to penetrate the public consciousness, despite the fact that his was hardly the first newspaper article to explain them to the general public. The quotes from public figures that *Ha'aretz* gathered and printed in a box alongside the article seemed to bear that out. No less a personage than Yossi Sarid, Israel's minister of education and the leader of the left-wing, secularist Meretz Party, expressed surprise and said he had been unaware of the claims presented by Mr. Herzog.

Broad consensus

Among academics, there is a broad consensus on some basic facts but differences of opinion about many details. That was clear from the Ben-Gurion University conference and another conference held last month at the Herzog Teacher Training College, an institution located in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank and associated with the country's religious Zionist community.

None of the scholars speaking at either conference believe that the Bible's historical sections can be accepted as literal, accurate descriptions of historical events. They also agree that the extra-biblical evidence for events described in the Bible dwindles the farther back in time one goes. King Ahab of Israel is well-documented in other inscriptions from elsewhere in the Middle East; the united monarchy of David and Solomon is not. Evidence exists of the rise of the new Israelite nation in the Palestinian highlands during the late Bronze Age -- the age of the Judges -- but it can be interpreted in different ways. There is no external evidence at all for the patriarchs and, in fact, the biblical description contains contradictions and anachronisms that, scholars generally agree, seem to place the patriarchs in the age of the Judges rather than several generations earlier, as the Bible has it.

Mr. Herzog concludes from such findings that the Bible simply should not be used as a historical source. The archaeological practice begun by William Foxwell Albright, who founded the discipline of biblical archaeology in the early part of the 20th century, was that findings in the field should be interpreted in the light of the biblical text. Mr. Herzog's new paradigm is that the Bible should be set aside and the findings interpreted in their own right.

"The demand to verify the Bible has coerced archaeology to interpret findings in a particular way," he says. "The result has been that the quantity of excuses exceeds the quantity of facts. Our interpretation has been skewed by this system. Now we're undergoing a revolution. Archaeology is becoming a science."

"If we didn't have the Bible, we wouldn't have dreamed of reconstructing the history of the period the way we have," Mr. Herzog adds, referring to the work of what he terms the "traditionalist old school" of archaeologists. And since the Bible itself is not a contemporary account of the events it describes but rather, he argues, a much later work whose purpose was to create a unifying mythological past for the Israelites, it should be set aside when it comes to reconstructing the place and period it ostensibly depicts.

Others

That position is rejected by other scholars. While agreeing that the biblical text cannot be taken literally and that it is problematic in many ways, Mordechai Cogan, a Hebrew University historian of the biblical period, insisted at the Ben-Gurion conference that, while the Bible was put in its present form at a later date, it is based on older historical chronicles and can thus provide important historical information.

"It is indeed possible to write history from the Bible," he declared. "It contains primary sources. The lack of evidence in the ground is not sufficient to negate evidence in writing, and the archaeologists need to be reminded of that morning, afternoon, and night."

That position is not held just by historians: Many archaeologists agree. One of those is Amihai Mazar of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. "Herzog," he says politely, "got a little too carried away. True, there's general concurrence that when it comes to the protohistory of the Israelites, archaeology can say very little." He points out that the patriarchs and their societies, given their nomadic culture, would not have left much for archaeologists to find.

"In any case," Mr. Mazar continues, "the archaeology of the land of Israel is very narrow. If we take a general look at the cultures of the Middle East in that time, we get a broad and very interesting background against which it is possible to understand the source of the biblical stories."

Take, for example, "the period of settlement" -- the period parallel to the biblical Book of Judges, when the Israelite nation took shape in the land of Canaan, an event that the archaeologists and historians place in 1200 to 1000 B.C. All agree that excavations have shown that in this period hundreds of small settlements were established in the central mountainous region of the country. That is the same region in which the stories of the Book of Judges take place, and there is general consensus that the inhabitants of those simple villages and homesteads were the forebears of the people who would later identify themselves as Israelite.

But where did they come from? Mr. Herzog emphasizes aspects of the finds in those settlements that do not fit with a mass settlement by new arrivals from Egypt. For example, the ceramics the settlers used were in the Canaanite style, and their language was apparently very close, if not identical, to the language spoken by the Canaanites.

"To a large extent, the artifacts continue the Canaanite tradition that preceded these settlements. There's no evidence of mass migration," he insists. He cites a theory propounded by his Tel Aviv colleague Israel Finkelstein that the settlements were established by shepherds who left the valleys and coastal plains when political, economic, and climatic crises forced them to start growing their own grain. In other words, the Israelites were Canaanites -- locals rather than new arrivals from Egypt.

Mr. Mazar, who excavated one of those small settlements that now is surrounded by the outlying Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, firmly disagrees. "True, the ceramics are similar. But there are types of Canaanite ceramics that are absent," he explains. In his mind, that absence suggests that the ceramics were not locally produced but purchased from the Canaanites.

More telling, he believes, is the design of the settlements and the individual homes, which were very different from Canaanite designs. "Where did this population come from? There's debate about that. But there's no contradiction here -- these people developed into something new. It's really exceptional confirmation of the biblical scenario," he maintains. Not a confirmation of its literal truth, he allows, for the new arrivals did not number in the millions as the Bible has it. But it may well be that a small group that indeed escaped slavery in Egypt arrived and merged with other migrants and local groups and forged a new identity and religion.

To Mr. Mazar and others of his persuasion, Mr. Herzog and scholars like him -- including a group of archaeologists and historians outside Israel often called the Copenhagen School because of their strong presence at the University of Copenhagen -- are minimalists and nihilists ready to hit the Bible over the head with every available potsherd. The epithet "post-Zionist" was also bandied about a great deal at the

Herzog college conference.

Ze'ev Herzog invited such a comparison by concluding his Ha'aretz article with an explicit linkage to modern Israeli history: "It turns out that part of Israeli society is ready to recognize the injustice that was done to the Arab inhabitants of the country and is willing to accept the principle of equal rights for women -- but is not up to adopting the archaeological facts that shatter the biblical myth. The blow to the mythical foundations of the Israeli identity is apparently too threatening, and it is more convenient to turn a blind eye," he wrote.

"This is all a debate between Zionism and post-Zionism," charged Rabbi Yoel Ben-Nun, a member of the Herzog college's faculty and a leader of the Israeli settlement movement in the West Bank, "and it's no coincidence that it is happening now. The attack on the Bible is part and parcel of the general attack on Zionist values that is exemplified by the current Israeli government's willingness, in the framework of the peace process, to hand over parts of the biblical land of Israel to the Palestinians."

Mr. Herzog sees it differently. It is precisely because Israel is firmly established and no longer in danger of being wiped out, he says, that he and other scholars can ask questions that were unaskable before. "The Jews in Israel no longer need the Bible to justify their presence in the Middle East. We're here because we're here. We no longer need excuses -- we're natives," he insists.

There is another kind of biblical scholar in Israel, however, who is not concerned with whether the Bible is history -- the scholar who plumbs the text for its literary complexity and its values. Such scholars have observed the recent Bible-as-history debate from the sidelines with some bemusement. As far as they're concerned, the whole polemic misses the point.

"It's just not important," declares Yair Zakovitch, professor of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and also the university's dean of humanities. Mr. Zakovitch, who describes himself as not religious, at least not in the conventional way, argues that the Bible's authors and redactors did not intend it to be a book of history. "The Bible is for teaching. Its characters, its history are only tools for getting across ideas. The main thing in the Bible is not if there was an event, but the ideas and ideology that it represents. The authors of the Bible knew that history can be reshaped to express ideas."

Much of Mr. Zakovitch's scholarly writing is on how different biblical narratives are interrelated. He sees the book as a web of stories and literary works that comment on, interpret, and mirror each other. "The Jewish sages said that every generation of our nation has to see itself as if it itself participated in the exodus from Egypt. So in our collective memory, we came out of Egypt," he explains.

"The Bible," he continues, "is the foundation of my nation's culture. It is perhaps the only common denominator for all Jews. We are all involved in a dialogue with the Bible."

Indeed, that was exactly what was going on in the conference room at Ben-Gurion University when that agonizing question was asked of the panel of lecturers.

"This is a psychological problem. I can't help you. That is, I could help you, but not in my capacity as a historian," replied Maynard Maidman of York University of Ontario to the questioner.

The troubled participant sat back in his chair and muttered:

"They didn't answer my question."

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