History or legend? Digging into Israel's origins: Digging into Israel's origins

by J. Maxwell Miller in the February 24, 2004 issue

What did the biblical writers know and when did they know it? That question formed the title of a recent book by William G. Dever. At issue is the historical veracity of the so-called historical books of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the early parts of the narrative that begins in the Book of Genesis with creation and concludes in the Book of 2 Kings with the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.

Quite apart from controversies connected with the Genesis account of creation, historians have puzzled over the story of 12 brothers who go into Egypt and father 12 tribes, and then under miraculous circumstances flee Egypt, wander for 40 years in the wilderness, invade Canaan, conquer the land and settle down. Given that Solomon is not mentioned in any other known sources from ancient times, a modern historian also has to wonder about what to make of the Bible’s description of his extensive empire, fabulous wealth and renowned wisdom. Are we dealing here with authentic historical memory, or with legends and folk tales that circulated centuries after ancient Israel would have come and gone and may have little to do with actual historical events? What did the biblical writers know and when did they know it?

Claiming archaeological support, Dever argues that “they know a lot; and they knew it early, based on older and genuinely historical accounts, both oral and written.” But many scholars disagree, and also appeal to archaeological evidence. Thomas L. Thomas, for example, in *Early History of the Israelite People*: *From Written and Archaeological Sources*, contends that the texts from Genesis to 2 Kings were compiled in the Persian Period or later—more than a half millennium after Solomon would have lived, and after even the Babylon destruction of Jerusalem would have largely faded from memory. The biblical writers had virtually no authentic historical information about early Israel at their disposal, according to Thompson, and they were not particularly interested in that anyhow. They present us instead with a

theologically driven story of Israel's distant past as they thought it should have happened.

Largely due to their aggressive rhetoric and tendency to sensationalize their arguments, Dever and Thomas are perhaps the best-known combatants of what has come to be known as the "maximalist-minimalist debate." A maximalist is one who is prepared to write a relatively full history of early Israelite history by beginning with the Genesis–2 Kings narrative and filling it out with information from other written sources and from archaeology. Minimalists, on the other hand, place little confidence in the veracity of the Bible and want to know what can be learned about ancient Israel from other written sources and archaeology alone, without any prompting from the Bible (what is learned, they would say, is not much). If a true minimalist were to try to write a history of early Israel, it would be a short one.

Unfortunately, much of the rhetoric surrounding the debate is misleading. A few clarifications: First, the debate is not new, but has roots going back to the 19th century and tentacles that go back even further. Second, while the debate may seem to be about the relevance of archaeology for understanding ancient Israel's origins and early history, the divisive issue is not the relevance of archaeology but the way archaeological evidence is interpreted. Third, few mainstream biblical scholars and Middle Eastern archaeologists could fairly be tagged as maximalists or minimalists, and most are put off by the rhetoric surrounding the debate.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries scholars began to employ the historical-critical method; philologists made the first major breakthroughs toward deciphering the languages and reading the documents of ancient Israel's neighbors; and archaeologists began to probe the ruins of cities from biblical times and developed techniques for dating their findings. Close on the heels of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), German scholar Julius Wellhausen published *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1883; tr. 1885), which had a corresponding impact on the study of the history of ancient Israel.

Wellhausen argued that the material from Genesis through 2 Kings was compiled from several different sources, the oldest of which postdated Solomon and the latest of which postdated the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. This raised the question of whether the Genesis through 2 Kings material could be regarded as a reliable source of information for Solomon's period or earlier. Few present-day scholars accept Wellhausen's views as originally presented, but most of those teaching in

major universities and seminaries would regard him as on the right track.

At first scholars had high hopes that inscriptions and other written documents from ancient times (“epigraphical” sources) would confirm the biblical account and add further information. These scholars were reassured when, in 1896, Egyptologists discovered a reference to Israel in an inscription from the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah (1212-1202 BC). Philological research continued through the 20th century, and there were other important epigraphical discoveries. In 1993-94, for example, archaeologists excavating at Tell Dan in modern Israel discovered two fragments of an inscription that refers to “the house of David.”

Yet when all is taken into account, the epigraphical evidence pertaining to ancient Israel is meager and disappointing. After the mention of Israel in Merneptah’s inscription—only a passing reference and difficult to interpret—there is silence for the next two-and-a-half centuries. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon—none of these biblical characters turns up in any ancient written sources outside the Bible. Nor are there any clear references to the Israelite exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan or Solomon’s empire. Not until the mid-ninth century BC, the time of Ahab and Jezebel, does reference to Israel turn up again in nonbiblical sources. From that point on there are, with one or two notable exceptions, only sporadic references to Israelite and Judean kings, mostly in Assyrian and Babylonian sources, and usually mentioned along with other petty rulers of the day.

In short, were we dependent upon the epigraphical sources alone for information about ancient Israel, we would know little more than that an entity known as Israel existed toward the end of the 13th century BC, and that two minor kingdoms, called Israel and Judah, existed alongside each other in the central Palestinian hill country after the mid-ninth century BC. We would know further that Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians toward the end of the eighth century BC and that Judah survived longer, but eventually was destroyed by the Babylonians early in the sixth century BC.

Nineteenth-century travelers made important strides toward mapping Palestine, identifying topographical features mentioned in the Bible, and locating the ruins of biblical cities and villages. By the end of that century, archaeologists had excavated a number of the ruins and were learning about everyday life during biblical times. As archaeological research continued into the 20th century, excavation and dating

techniques became more sophisticated. Archaeologists worked out the basics of pottery dating by the 1920s, for example, and Carbon 14 dating entered the picture in 1933.

But archaeology is most useful for recognizing broad patterns and tracing gradual changes in the material culture of a region—less so for clarifying specific historical events. When archaeology does have bearing on the specifics of biblical history, the evidence is often uncertain and sometimes disconcerting.

For example, prompted by new techniques for dating pottery, Carl Watzinger in the 1920s reexamined the pottery from Jericho which he and Ernst Sellin had excavated between 1907 and 1909. He concluded that Jericho apparently was not occupied during the Late Bronze Age when Joshua presumably would have lived. And he took this to mean that the biblical account of the Israelite conquest of Jericho was, as some suspected already, a legend.

Fellow archaeologist John Garstang insisted that this could not possibly be true and set about (with further excavations at Jericho and soundings at Ai and Hazor) to restore archaeological support for the historicity of the conquest. Garstang was successful to his own satisfaction, but not to that of other leading archaeologists of the day. The debate was under way.

During the 1930s, two creative scholars, Albrecht Alt and W. F. Albright, championed alternative approaches to the history of Israel, alternatives that tended to dominate the discussion through the 1960s. Alt found his strongest following in Europe, while Albright found his strongest support in the U.S.

Their approaches had much in common. Neither Alt nor Albright was prepared to take the biblical account of Israel’s origins and early history entirely at face value, yet both saw it as a rich source of historical information. Both were fully conversant with the epigraphical and archaeological evidence. The differences lay in how they extracted information from the Bible, in how they correlated it with the epigraphical and archaeological evidence, and in the different conclusions that they reached regarding the origins of ancient Israel.

Alt placed little confidence in the overall storyline of the Bible from Genesis through Joshua, including Abraham and family’s emigration from Mesopotamia to Canaan, the sojourn in Egypt, the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. But he believed that there were many historical nuggets embedded in the story (songs,

lists, genealogical fragments and such) that could be extracted by means of literary analysis and used to reconstruct a more scientific explanation of Israel's origins. Sociological theory, especially the views of Max Weber, also figured significantly in Alt's approach.

According to Alt, the people who became Israel entered the land of Canaan as scattered groups of nomads, gradually settled down and formed tribal alliances, and eventually gained control of the land. There was no exodus from Egypt and no military conquest of Canaan, at least not before King David. Alt's approach and conclusions were developed further by his student, Martin Noth, whose history of Israel became a standard work on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1950s and 1960s.

Albright regarded the overall storyline of Genesis through Joshua as essentially historical, but had no qualms about adjusting its details. In making adjustments, he was more inclined to rely on archaeology than on anthropological theory, and he managed to correlate the Bible story with the archaeological periods in a fashion that seemed reasonably convincing. Albright contended that Abraham was a historical individual who entered Palestine in connection with Amorite migrations which, according to the thinking at the time, would have occurred during the transition from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age (approximately 2000 BC). Widespread destruction of cities in Palestine at the close of the Late Bronze Age (approximately 1200 BC) was attributed to Israelite invaders recently escaped from Egypt.

Albright's approach flourished under the rubric "biblical archaeology." His views were expounded by two of his students: G. Ernest Wright in *Biblical Archaeology* (1957) and John Bright in *A History of Israel* (1959). Both books were very influential, especially in the U.S., through the 1960s. Bright's history is still in print and widely read.

By the early 1970s both approaches began to run aground. Alt's work was undermined by shifting sociological theory, Albright's by accumulating archaeological evidence that did not fit his correlations between archaeology and the Bible. Other factors were also at work. Whereas Wellhausen had challenged the historical reliability of the biblical account on the grounds that it was compiled from multiple sources that originated long after the events reported, his intellectual successors a century later were employing methodologies (such as rhetorical

criticism and narrative criticism) that seemed to assume that the biblical writers were not particularly concerned with historical accuracy anyhow.

Archaeologists, for their part, were focusing more on anthropological questions and were less interested in biblical connections. Both biblical scholars and archaeologists reacted against the biblical archaeology framework. It seemed that too many of the archaeological arguments advanced in support of the Bible story were convincing only to those who wanted to be convinced, and the “archaeological solutions” to problematic historical questions tended to sidetrack the search for other possible solutions.

The winds of reaction and change were evident in publications of the 1970s and 1980s, which included two full-length treatments of Israelite history: J. A. Soggin’s *A History of Ancient Israel* (1984) and J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes’s *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (1986). Both volumes were cautious in their use of archaeological evidence, and both were less confident than either Noth or Bright as to what could be known about early Israelite history. Neither history had an Israelite exodus from Egypt or a military conquest of Canaan. Miller and Hayes suggested that the biblical description of Solomon’s reign was more legend than history. The historical Solomon, in their opinion, would have had at most local renown.

Reactions to this consensus were mixed. For some, these works showed too much caution and too little use of archaeological evidence. For others, they still relied too much on the biblical account.

As the debate has unfolded over the past century and a half, the center of controversy has shifted from earlier to later segments of the narrative from Genesis to 2 Kings. In the aftermath of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, the debate focused on Genesis 1. After Wellhausen, the historicity of the patriarchs and of the Mosaic era emerged as the chief matter of dispute. (Was Moses a historic lawgiver at the beginning of Israel’s history, or were both the Moses character and the law largely literary constructs on the part of the late Judean compilers of the Pentateuch?)

During the mid-20th century, Albright, Alt and their students argued over the historicity of the Israelite exodus from Egypt and military conquest of Canaan. Albright and his students viewed these as historical events, although not having occurred exactly when and how the Bible described. Alt and his students were unwilling to speak of the existence of a historical Israel before scattered groups of

nomads had settled in Palestine and formed a tribal alliance—or about the time of the Judges in the biblical narrative. Today much of the debate focuses on Solomon.

The current debate over Solomon shows how the argument between the maximalist and minimalist positions is not over whether archaeological evidence should be considered but over how it should be interpreted. Biblical chronology places Solomon in the tenth century BC, and he is depicted as an extremely wealthy king who ruled over an extensive empire and exerted far-reaching international influence. The Bible indicates that he imported luxury goods from afar and that he built many cities, including Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer. Archaeologists excavating the ruins of all three of these named cities have uncovered fortifications with impressive city gates from approximately the tenth century BC. The ruins are silent; there are no inscriptions or any other clues as to who built the fortifications. If one assumes that the biblical account of Solomon's reign is reasonably accurate, then it makes sense to attribute the fortifications and gates to Solomon.

Suppose, however, that one has strong reservations about the historical reliability of the texts, especially the larger-than-life description of Solomon, and one believes that any proper history of ancient Israel must be based on firsthand sources. Solomon does not turn up in any ancient written sources outside the Bible, and the archaeological ruins offer no clue. In short, no Solomon.

Even a more moderate historian—one who suspects that the biblical account of Solomon's reign is based on folk tales and legends that circulated more than a half millennium after the real Solomon lived, yet is open to the possibility that these folk tales and legends hark back to a historical figure—may have reservations about crediting this legendary Solomon with the fortifications and gates at Hazor, Gezer and Megiddo. And even if our moderate historian does attribute them to Solomon, he or she may still have reservations about affirming the existence of a Solomonic empire. Why, if Solomon ruled an extensive empire for 40 years (or even close to that), are there no inscriptions from his reign, and no mention of him in the records of other peoples of the day? If he engaged in international trade and imported luxury goods, why are so few trade goods from his era to be found in the ruins at Hazor, Gezer, Megiddo and other sites throughout Palestine? And why are there only meager remains from Solomon's supposed capital Jerusalem, the centerpiece of his building projects, that can be dated even approximately to the tenth century?

Archaeologists do not excavate “facts”; they excavate material remains—city ruins, wall foundations and potsherds. These materials must be interpreted. When dealing with Palestinian artifacts from biblical times, it makes a great deal of difference whether one assumes from the outset that the biblical record is essentially accurate, or whether one assumes the opposite.

The true maximalist approach would be to begin with full confidence in the historicity, or at least essential historicity, of the Genesis through 2 Kings narrative, and use this narrative as a guide for interpreting the meager epigraphical and silent archaeological evidence potentially relevant to the history of ancient Israel. The result would be a rather full historical reconstruction of events beginning with historical patriarchs and tracking the Bible story through Solomon’s Golden Age and beyond. An example of this approach is *A Biblical History of Israel* (2003), by Iain Provan, Philips Long and Tremper Longman III.

The true minimalist would disregard the Genesis–2 Kings narrative altogether and attempt to determine what can be known from the meager epigraphical references and archaeological remains alone, interpreted without any prompting from the Bible. The result would be some very sketchy notes about two petty kingdoms that show up occasionally in inscriptions from the ninth century BC and afterwards. An example of this approach is Niels Peter Lemche’s *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (1998).

Most scholars search for reasonable ground between these extremes, but often lean in one direction or the other. In *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It*? (2002) William Dever leans in the maximalist direction. Yet in that book and in *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From*? (2003), Dever’s account has no historical patriarchs, no exodus from Egypt and no military conquest of Canaan. He does, in contrast to miminalist-leaning Israel Finkelstein, hold firm to a Solomonic empire.

Finkelstein, in *The Bible Unearthed* (2001), coauthored with journalist Nell Silberman, sees no evidence of any such empire in tenth-century Palestine, and furthermore dates the Hazor, Gezer and Megiddo fortifications in the ninth century BC. For Finkelstein and Silberman, ancient Israel’s modest “golden age” occurred not under Solomon but under Omri and Ahab, who ruled from Samaria during the ninth century. The debate will continue.