Teaching Biblical Archaeology at Yeshiva University

View PDF



Dr. Jill Katz teaches archaeology and anthropology at Yeshiva University with a specialty in biblical archaeology. She has excavated at several sites in Israel, including Ashkelon, Tel Haror/Gerar, and most recently Tell es-Safi/Gath. Her current research interests focus on the nature of Israelite leadership during the time of the Judges (Iron I period) and on emergent urban life during the time of King David (Iron IIa). She is the author of The Archaeology of Cult in Middle Bronze Age Canaan (2009). This article appears in issue 15 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

"I didn't know they teach biblical archaeology at YU" is one of the most frequent responses I receive upon informing people about my job and its whereabouts. I find this amusing because to me biblical archaeology is such a natural fit for the study of Tanakh that it seems self-evident that these two disciplines should be studied in tandem. I am not alone in this approach as the original mission statement for the creation of Yeshiva College in the 1920s makes clear:

Yeshiva College will offer, with the standard college curricula combined with courses in Bible, Hebrew philology, Jewish history and literature, Jewish philosophy and ethics, the Talmud and Rabbinic literature, *Jewish archaeology*, Semitic philology and cognate subjects (emphasis mine).[1]

And yet, people are still surprised that biblical archaeology is taught at Yeshiva University—as if it were too radical a subject, or too dangerous, or perhaps not relevant.

This view is even more perplexing in light of the fact that the Land of Israel is among the most intensely excavated regions of the world (only Greece comes close). While Christian Americans and Europeans dominated the field in the early part of the twentieth century, today Israeli archaeologists are at the forefront of research and research projects. With so much active research and much of it done by Israeli scholars, again why the hesitancy to fully embrace the discipline?

The answer is complex, and reveals both external and internal strains. Externally, the discipline of biblical archaeology itself has evolved from one that primarily saw its goal as illuminating the biblical narrative to a more scientific one that has at times relegated biblical narrative to the background. Religious teachers of Tanakh are often uncomfortable with this "secular" approach. On the other hand, while such teachers have been receptive to selecting individual archaeological finds that can shed light

on particular biblical passages, they have often shied away from confronting the archaeological record when it seems to present a more nuanced or perhaps contradictory view of traditional readings of the text. The unwillingness to engage the data on its own terms has led to an approach that can be characterized as lacking in academic rigor and integrity.

My goal in this article, therefore, will be to demystify the discipline of biblical archaeology so that religious teachers of Tanakh feel comfortable embracing its discourse and to argue for inclusion of these findings into a richer and more sophisticated understanding of the biblical text. Finally, I will argue that those with a strong understanding and commitment to Tanakh have a perspective that can greatly enrich biblical archaeological studies. In fact, the absence of such a perspective threatens to deprive the discipline of its vitality, accuracy, and *raison d'être*.

Biblical archaeology as a discipline focuses on the places and time periods that are central to the biblical narrative. In general, this means that the core region is the Land of Israel, with a periphery reaching into parts of present-day Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. This region is customarily referred to as the southern Levant. The core time periods are the period of the Judges, United Monarchy, Divided Monarchy, Babylonian period, and Persian period. The time span is roughly from 1200 bce–333 bce. Archaeologists refer to these periods as Iron I (1200-1000 bce), Iron II (1000 bce–586 bce), Babylonian (586–538 bce), and Persian (538–333 bce). Technically, then, for those operating within a traditional Jewish perspective, the biblical period closes with the final historical context of the biblical canon. The Christian perspective, of course, proffers a later end date, as the Christian Bible extends throughout the Second Temple Period. Thus in the larger and even academic community, biblical archaeology as a discipline extends beyond the Persian period through Hellenistic, Roman, and even into Byzantine times.

The fact that the time frame of biblical archaeology moves beyond the end of the Hebrew Bible, while potentially confusing, does not pose any real complications. Those with a Jewish perspective simply choose to end their biblical period with the Restoration of the Second Temple and the Persian period. The subsequent Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods are often lumped under the rubric of the Classical period.

From its inception, biblical archaeology was closely tied to the Bible. The dominant American figure of twentieth-century biblical archaeology, William Foxwell Albright, trained generations of students in his approach that took a positivistic view toward biblical narrative and was oriented toward reconstructing the archaeological, historical, religious, and literary context of the biblical world. This approach was formed in part by his own excavations and expertise in material culture and by his facility with ancient languages that allowed him to read and translate texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Egyptian, Akkadian, and Sumerian, among other languages.

While not a biblical literalist, Albright's interpretations and those of his students generally supported the biblical narrative. In the second half of the twentieth century, cracks began to emerge in this consensus. New archaeological finds seemed to contradict biblical narrative, while at the same time a younger generation of scholars, influenced by current trends in general archaeology, began to argue for a less "biblical" approach and a more "scientific" one. Broad issues of cultural change and the rise of social and political complexity came to the forefront, whereas specific questions of biblical historicity were ignored.

The field of biblical archaeology certainly benefited from more scientific rigor, especially in its methodology, but also in its interpretations. However, the disregard for biblical text emerged as an Achilles heel when a new generation of biblical scholars primarily from northern Europe began to inject a revisionist view into biblical studies and ultimately into biblical archaeology. The biblical archaeology community was slow to respond to these new interpretations, partly because they were seen as so far out that they did not need responding to. When the archaeologists finally did take note, they realized they were confronting a host of scholars who had re-interpreted the Bible and whose views were gaining prominence in both the academic and non-academic community. Most problematic, was that these revisionists were deliberately obfuscating the archaeological record.

The acrimony of this debate between revisionists (minimalists) and the traditionalists (maximalists) has been damaging both to individual scholars and to the reputation of the discipline. Those outside the

fray were made to feel powerless as these polarizing forces came to dominate the debate. And what were they debating, anyway? Whether or not King David was a real king? For the traditionalist, of course, this was a non-starter. But even trying to understand the debate has been difficult without concluding that the motives of the minimalist school to discredit the Hebrew Bible were infused with anti-Semitism. If this were the end of it, the situation would be quite discouraging, indeed.

However, mainstream biblical archaeologists were not ready to yield control of the debate to the minimalists and their supporters in the archaeological community (e.g., Israel Finkelstein). The lack of archaeological evidence for David's kingdom had to be addressed, and this has been precisely the focus of much of the archaeological research in the past two decades. Although 20 years ago, minimalists could mock traditionalists for clinging to a narrative with no archaeological support, that is certainly not the case today. While a full account of the finds pertaining to the United Monarchy under David and Solomon is beyond the scope of this paper, three significant examples will suffice.

The first significant find was a stele (inscribed stone) found at Tel Dan in 1993. Written in Aramaic, this royal, monumental inscription commissioned by a ninth-century bce king (probably Hazael) boasts of Aramean military achievements over the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The text uses the phrase *bytdvd* ("House of David") to refer to the southern kingdom. This is the earliest extra-biblical mention of David and is consistent with ancient Near Eastern practice of referring to a kingdom by its eponymous founder. For traditionalists, this was the first step in reclaiming David as a historical personage. For minimalists, this posed a big problem, which they feebly tried to discredit by first reading *bytdvd* not as "House of David" but rather as "house of the uncle." Subsequently, they posited other interpretations—equally unconvincing—citing the absence of a word divider between *byt* and *dvd*.

Even when minimalists were willing to acknowledge the existence of David—and the Tel Dan stele made it hard not to—they still maintained that David was not a true king but rather a simple tribal chieftain. This allowed them to argue that true statehood emerged in ancient Israel much later, and that the biblical narrative of a United Monarchy was a later fabrication. Again, 20 years ago, the minimalists could point to the fact that no monumental architecture had been found in Jerusalem associated with David or Solomon.

Why this is important is that one of the principal archaeological correlates for statehood is the presence of such architecture. The absence of monumental architecture confirmed for them that there was no state. However, one should always be careful of deriving arguments from negative evidence. Indeed, the minimalists' position suffered a severe blow when in 2005 archaeologist Eilat Mazar announced that she had found in Ir David (City of David) the foundations of a royal monumental building, which she named the "Large Stone Structure." Whether or not this building was part of Kind David's actual palace as Mazar posits, does not change the fact that monumental architecture from the time of David (dated by the pottery finds) has finally been found in Jerusalem. Kings, not tribal chieftains, build such structures. Minimalists responded in the only way they could to retain their ideological stance: they rejected outright Mazar's dating of the Large Stone Structure.

A final irrefutable blow emerged in the last five years, with the excavations of a small, fortified site in the Elah Valley called Khirbet Qeiyafa. This site yielded not only evidence of a central Israelite administration but also was unequivocally dated to the time of King David by radiocarbon analysis of olive pits found in secure archaeological contexts. That the site was Israelite and not Philistine or Canaanite is strongly attested by the style of wall construction (casemate), the pottery, the lack of pig bones and figurines, and an early Hebrew inscription. Only a centralized administration would be capable of organizing the construction *de novo* of a border fortress. It follows then that David was a true king who took an active role in securing his borders from external threats, particularly the Philistines to the west.

These recent finds have shifted the center of argument away from the minimalists and their ideologically motivated interpretations towards a more central position in which the layers of historicity in Tanakh are refracted against the archaeological record. This middle approach, while certainly "secular" need not pose a threat to a traditional Jewish consideration. For the Jewish approach to Tanakh has never been a strictly literal one but rather an interpretive one. The so-called historical

books of the Bible—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles—were not written as pure history in the modern sense, and they are certainly not unbiased. On the contrary, they deliberately and unabashedly impart a theological message. For example, the Book of Samuel focuses on the motif of why David is to be chosen over Saul.[2] The theme then dictates the narrative as only those stories that develop it need to be mentioned. Consequently, while the text makes clear that Saul is a gifted military leader waging a successful campaign against the Philistines, the textual emphasis is not on the minutiae of battle, attacks and counter-attacks, but rather on Saul's reaction to his success. Namely, Saul credits himself with victory rather than God, and this is what makes him unfit as a leader for the Jewish people.

Accepting the primacy of the theological message does not negate the important historical and cultural material that is embedded in Tanakh. Moreover, these nuggets are not gleaned in a vacuum. One of the great achievements of biblical studies over the past century has been the decipherment of ancient Near Eastern texts—cuneiform, hieroglyphic, alphabetic—from Mesopotamia and Persia in the east to Egypt in the south, and Anatolia in the north. Add to this a century of archaeological exploration throughout the region, and scholars have reached a point where specific historical events, intellectual currents, and general lifestyles can all be recreated to one degree another. Thus the biblical material finds itself in conversation with not only the archaeological record from the Land of Israel—which has yielded a small but important corpus of extra-biblical texts—but also with the vast corpus of ancient Near Eastern material.

Gaining access to this material may seem daunting at first, particularly because very few overviews exist and each geographic region is often treated as its own separate discipline. Encyclopedias and cultural atlases provide good starting points, such as *The Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia* by Michael Roaf, but these usually include material from time periods that are not relevant to the biblical period. Textbooks are comprehensive by nature, their usefulness measured by their accessibility to non-specialists. One of the better introductory textbooks is Hershel Shanks' edited volume *Ancient Israel*. More concise presentations can be found among the titles published by Oxford University Press in their series titled "Very Short Introductions." Two such examples are *Ancient Egypt* by Ian Shaw and *Biblical Archaeology* by Eric Cline. While newspaper articles will often feature recent discoveries, more lengthy and explanatory pieces can be found in periodicals, the most popular of which is *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

Meanwhile, the best resource for ancient texts related to the biblical world is *The Context of Scripture*, edited by William Hallo and K. Lawson Younger. This three-volume tome contains hundreds of translated texts spanning a range of compositions—canonical, archival, and monumental—that relate directly and indirectly to Tanakh and the biblical world. Although not every known ancient Near Eastern text has been included, the selection is overwhelmingly comprehensive and the translations nicely balance readability with literal accuracy.

There are, of course, limitations to this textual material. The writers of ancient texts generally reflect the views, goals, and ambitions of the (overwhelmingly male) ruling or upper class. Although literacy during the biblical period was not rare in Judah or Israel, it was by no means universal. Evidence such as notations on pottery and ivory suggests that artisans and craftsmen were literate, but it is doubtful that the farmers who comprised the majority of the population could read or write. Another problem with texts is that huge gaps both temporally and geographically exist in their distribution. What this means is that texts are found neither everywhere nor from all time periods. Rather, their presence is concentrated in urban areas and in caches that generally reflect a specific era of time. Thus texts present a window on the elite and male urban population from disparate time periods.

The archaeological record, in contrast, does not suffer from these limitations. It is equally frequent today to find researchers excavating elite zones of cities where temples, palaces, and public buildings congregate as well as outer areas where basic households cluster. When looking at top plans of archaeological sites, these different areas are indicated by different letters. Moreover, one of the stratigraphic goals of the expedition is to unite the separate areas into a single chronological scheme. In addition, many research projects today incorporate not only the entire urban area but also the surrounding countryside. Such projects bring new insight into the relationship between urban cores and

their supporting hinterlands.

In terms of temporal continuity, archaeological remains are far superior to texts. Gaps in material reflect real gaps in occupation. Otherwise, the detritus of daily life accumulates layer by layer without interruption. The basics of daily life—mud bricks for building homes and ceramic vessels for storage, food preparation and consumption—were used by all people, rich and poor, male and female. Whereas the textual evidence simply ignores the vast majority of the population, the archaeological record highlights the differences between groups. Thus, wealthy people lived in larger homes, closer to the center of town, possessing fine decorated wares and exotic items. Poorer people lived in smaller homes suited to their agricultural lifestyle, closer to their fields, with basic wares and few, if any, luxury items. Gendered items such as spindle whorls and grinding stones for women and arrowheads and axes for men provide insight into the structure of daily life.

This does not mean, however, that archaeology is without its biases. The archaeological record is partial toward items that preserve well. Thus the most perishable materials such as foodstuffs, textiles, papyrus, and wooden implements are found only in exceptional circumstances. Ceramics are the single most common find due to their widespread use, fragility as complete vessels (i.e., they break easily), and incredible durability as shards. Another bias lies with collection methods. Decades ago, it was not customary to collect animal bones. As a result little information about diet and husbandry emerged. However, archaeologists today are much more careful about trying to safeguard all of the remains and have the non-material culture remains analyzed by specialists from other fields. For example, faunal and floral experts are routinely consulted, as are scientists who sample sediment deposits, extract DNA, or perform carbon 14 dating.

Just as texts can speak toward specific historic events, archaeology can as well. The construction of a new town or a new building can be attested. More impressive is when the texts speak of a city's demise and the archaeological record preserves a thick, clear layer of destruction filled with charred material, fallen bricks, whole vessels left behind, unfortunate people who did not escape, roof material from collapsed homes, and, in some cases, arrowheads and other ballista that attest to the intensity of the fighting. Lachish is such a site that preserves not one but two clearly identified destruction layers. The first (Stratum III) correlates with the Assyrian conquest in the late 8th century bce under Sennacherib whereas the second (Stratum II) is from the time of the Babylonian conquest under Nebuchadnezzar a century later.

Our understanding of the Assyrian siege at Lachish is further elucidated by a series of reliefs unearthed at Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh in present-day Iraq. These reliefs attest to the composition of Assyrian military personnel—slingers, archers, lancers, and so forth—the strategy of building ramps to elevate the battering rams, the great loss of life, the ultimate surrender of the people of Lachish, and the bringing of booty and humans back to Assyria. The archaeological record can also attest to things that were previously unknown from textual or pictorial evidence. For example, opposite the Assyrian siege ramp, the people of Lachish had hastily built a counter ramp and raised the height of the wall as a defensive technique. Moreover, while the Assyrian ramp was known from the reliefs, only excavations could reveal that this earthen ramp contained 25,000 tons of material composed of a stone base consolidated by mortar, covered by layers of beaten earth, with logs sprinkled in to support the siege engines and facilitate their transport up the slope.

If validating and expanding on specific biblical events were all that archaeology could achieve, then the discipline would indeed be only a dedicated handmaiden of biblical studies. However, the archaeological record has great potential beyond this primarily in the range of culture and cultural context. For example, when Abraham visits Gerar (Genesis 20), the Bible focuses on the incident of Abraham concealing the true identity of his Sarah ("She is my sister" [verse 2]) and the repercussions thereof. There was of course much more to the visit. What did Abraham and Sarah see when they were wondering the streets of Gerar? What did they eat or smell or hear?

From excavations, we know that if Abraham and Sarah wandered toward the southwestern quadrant of the city—not inconceivable since the city itself was not that big—they would have seen a large, symmetric, fortress-like, Canaanite temple. It is not likely that they would have gone inside for a variety of reasons, including the fact that only religious specialists, i.e., priests, would have been given

access. However, the surrounding courtyards would have been easily visible, and in them they would have seen much activity: throngs of people, bringing with them food offerings in either miniature or regular sized vessels, animals being slaughtered, incense being burned, puppies with their necks broken as part of healing rituals, people eating sacred meals, and, on one day only (their timing would have to have been impeccable), the ritual sacrifice of a donkey as part of a non-aggression pact between two potentially warring parties. The food offerings would attest to the produce of the land such as wine, oil, wheat, barley, legumes, and so forth, whereas the animal sacrifices reflected the pastoral component of the economy: sheep and goats mainly, some cattle, and even birds. The archaeological record thus illuminates the biblical world and its context.

Those with a strong background are poised to take particular advantage of all that archaeology has to offer as they have a context in which to absorb it. This is why teaching biblical archaeology at an institution such as Yeshiva University is particularly exciting—the students already possess the building blocks of biblical narrative and thus are able to synthesize the new archaeological material very quickly. They grasp nuances that are lost on novices, ask questions reflecting a vast knowledge, and provide interpretations that reveal deep understanding.

One such example arose during a discussion of the economy of the Land of Israel during the Assyrian period (7th century). There is strong evidence that the area around Ashkelon specialized in wine, that around Ekron in olive oil, and that around Jerusalem in cereals. However, there is also evidence for some wine production around Jerusalem. It has been generally accepted that the reason for this is that the real estate close to the city was expensive and thus a more profitable crop such as wine was grown to cover costs. Upon hearing this explanation, the students at Yeshiva University immediately suggested another explanation: perhaps the reason for producing wine in the Jerusalem area was due to concerns of kashrut, with Judah preferring to produce its own kosher wine rather than trading for the readily available, Philistine wine from Ashkelon.

We do not know the answer yet, but because of their Torah perspective, the students at Yeshiva University are offering new insights that can potentially guide and certainly enrich the direction of future research in biblical archaeology.

Notes

[1] Bernard Revel, “The Yeshiva College” [1926], in Aaron Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Orthodoxy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1972), pp. 256ff.

[2] I am indebted to Rabbi Menachem Leibtag for pointing this out to me.