Review Essay

ARCHAEOLOGY, ICONOGRAPHY, AND THE RECREATION OF THE PAST IN IRON AGE HOLY LANDS

PAMELA BERGER
Boston College


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These are momentous times in the archaeology of Israel/Palestine. After decades of excavation, most archaeologists have concluded that the stories about the patriarchs were more legend than history; the Israelites were never in Egypt; and Joshua did not conquer the land and pass it on to the twelve tribes. Even more startling to the non-specialist, scholars are interpreting the archaeological evidence to suggest that the extensive kingdom of David and Solomon described in the Bible did not exist; that the religion of Judah as well as Israel was not monotheistic; and that Iron Age Judah was not aniconic, but actually had statues of YHWH, and perhaps even of “his Asherah” [female companion]. These conclusions are in part the result of archaeological evidence and iconographic interpretations which now supplement traditional text-orientated approaches to the history of the region.

The new perspectives have provoked internecine battles and have become part of the regional political struggles. In the mid-nineties a critique developed by Keith W. Whitelam in *The Invention of Ancient Israel...
charged that the monarchic tradition of David and Solomon outlined in the Bible gave rise, in the modern period, to an interpretation of history that excluded other peoples in the area. This interpretation in turn was used to formulate a version of the past that stressed the uniqueness and superiority of Israel and the inferiority of the indigenous people (read Palestinians). Whitelam contended that Judeo-Christian “biblical” archaeologists, bound by their own cultures and traditions, concentrated only on the history of the Jewish people rather than on a history of the region as a whole. Their emphasis on proving the existence of a remarkable Iron Age monarchy in the tenth century BCE (the time of David and Solomon) denied a space and a time to the histories of others.¹ The questions raised by these new perspectives pose a challenge to the field and have provoked some angry encounters. Not only have normally staid western scholars turned uncharacteristically vitriolic, but conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis have erupted at archaeological symposia.

In the midst of this rancor, *The Bible Unearthed*, written by the Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein in cooperation with Neil Silberman, appears measured and judicious. Finkelstein is the head of the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology; Neil Silberman is a historian trained at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and contributing editor for *Archeology Magazine*. Their book presents an overview of the archaeological evidence in Israel/Palestine from the late Bronze Age to the early sixth century. Unlike many earlier archaeologists, Finkelstein does not rely on digging at a particular site in order to “prove” the accuracy of a particular biblical text. His methodology is more inclusive. He and his team undertake surveys of the land, broad surface excavations that aim at revealing as much as it will yield about the various cultures and peoples who inhabited it. And this means all of the peoples, not just the people of Israel. His interpretations rest on an analysis of inscriptions and artifacts from the whole of the Near East, and he incorporates the insights of anthropologists, geographers, and economists – in short, of research in any field that he feels can contribute to a better understanding of the past.

A case in point is his study of the biblical account of the battle of Jericho. The notion of the historicity of the Joshuaan conquests had seen some support among scholars until fairly recently. But Finkelstein and his school have confirmed that the destruction implicit in the conquest text never occurred. No evidence exists that Canaanite cities, located on the coastal plain and in the valleys, were destroyed at or near the time of the supposed conquest. Indeed, unlike the description in the Bible, the