

The problems of traditional chronology

A review of
*David and Solomon:
In Search of the Bible's
Sacred Kings and the
Roots of the Western
Tradition*

By Israel Finkelstein and
Neil Asher Silberman
Free Press, New York,
2006

David Down

D*avid and Solomon* is the title of a book written by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, published in 2006 by Free Press. It is subtitled 'In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition'.

Finkelstein is a brilliant archaeologist and a gifted writer. He has excavated at the important biblical sites of Shiloh and Megiddo. In 2001, the same two authors published the book *The Bible Unearthed*.¹ Finkelstein has also recently appeared in TV documentaries dealing with similar themes to those presented in his books.

Their books reveal a commendable knowledge of Bible history and they skilfully draw on other historical sources. The authors do not deny that the events described in the historical records of the Bible ever happened. They assume they are based on a kernel of truth but they assert that the Bible records were written many centuries after they all happened and that the records they preserve are grossly exaggerated and unreliable.

Their allegations are based on the profuse archaeological evidence for the nature of the Iron Age IIa stratum. According to the traditional chronology adopted by most of the archaeological world, this is the period of David and Solomon, and if that chronology is correct it must be

conceded that the authors are justified in their conclusions.

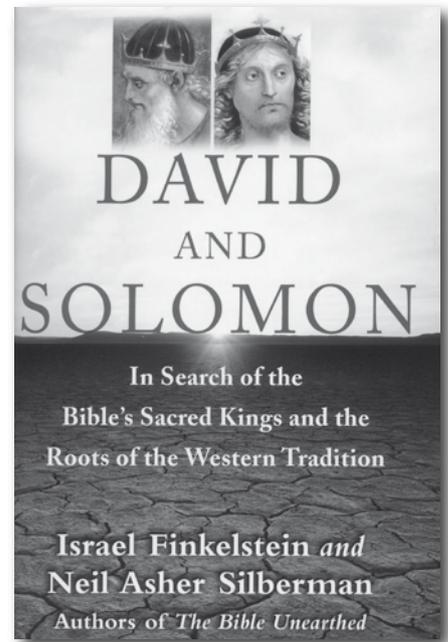
The Bible depicts the reign of David as militarily very successful, bringing the surrounding nations of Syria, Ammon, Moab and Edom into subjection to Israel. Solomon further extended the borders of his kingdom 'from the river (Euphrates) to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt' (1 Kings 4:21).

Not only was the kingdom of Israel extensive, it was fabulously wealthy. 'Solomon made a treaty with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and married Pharaoh's daughter' (1 Kings 3:1). 'Solomon had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen' (1 Kings 4:26). The Queen of Sheba 'gave the king one hundred and twenty talents (4 tons) of gold'.

'All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; not one was of silver, for this was accounted as nothing in the days of Solomon. For the king had merchant ships at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the merchant ships came bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes and monkeys ... The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones' (1 Kings 10:21, 22, 27).

This would have been unprecedented wealth and opulence, so there should be plenty of evidence to support it in the archaeological excavations. Instead, the Iron Age IIa stratum discloses only evidence of poverty and low technological achievements. This is what this book under review is all about. It could not have happened as the Bible describes it!

So if David and Solomon existed but in a totally different environment, what did happen and when? The authors profess to have very keen discernment and proceed to reconstruct what did actually happen, and analyse



the motives of the scribes who invented all the trimmings associated with these 'legends'.

The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles were not written at the time the events happened' in the late seventh century BCE, during the reign of King Josiah of Judah' (p. 13). And 'after the destruction of the Iron Age kingdom of Judah in 586 BCE (before the Christian era—the authors are Jewish and the expression 'Before Christ', BC, is distasteful to them) 'the legendary fame of David and Solomon was elaborated and uniquely cherished' (p. 9). They claim that these records 'are clearly the result of the editing together of various earlier sources' (p. 14).

The authors fall into the trap of using the expression 'we now know' (p. 16). How often that expression has been used in the past by professors in all scientific fields when later scholars demonstrate that they knew nothing of the sort. Knowledge is progressive and truth we may think we know today may turn out to be blatant error tomorrow.

The Bible is right

The authors at least acknowledge that events from a later period, when other reliable historical sources are available, do confirm the Bible record:

‘The Babylonian Chronicle, for example, mentions the siege of Jerusalem during King Jehoiachin’s brief reign in the seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar, 597 BCE. Manasseh’s tribute to Assyria is noted in an inscription of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon in 674 BCE. The Assyrian attack on Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah is mentioned in the annals of Sennacherib for the equivalent of 701 BCE. Ahaz’s payment of tribute to Assyria is listed in an inscription of Tiglath-Pileser III, dated to 734 BCE’ (p. 19).

Strange that the Bible could get it so right when it can be verified from other sources, but it was just a bunch of legends when it can neither be verified as true nor proved false when there are no other historical records available. They are just ‘myths of antiquity ... shared expressions of ancient communal identity, told with great power and insight, still interesting and worthy of study, but certainly not to be taken as literal, credible records of events’ (p. 21).

‘Many of the famous episodes in the biblical story of David and Solomon are fictions, historically questionable, or highly exaggerated’ (p. 21). From the archaeological evidence they conclude that ‘Solomon’s Jerusalem was neither extensive nor impressive, but rather the rough hilltop stronghold of a local dynasty of rustic tribal chiefs’ (p. 22).

David is depicted as a ‘bandit chief’ (p. 31), and if the traditional chronology is accepted, that would have to be acknowledged as truth, but the authors are obliged to acknowledge that geographically the Bible record shows uncanny accuracy. ‘The sheer weight of geographical information and long lists of place-names interwoven in its stories testify to a familiarity with the ancient landscape of Judah and Israel’ (p. 33). ‘The biblical geography closely matches the actual landscape’ (p. 36).

The missing manuscripts

The authors refer to the fact that ‘extensive literacy is lacking in Judah before the end of the eighth century BCE’ (p. 37). The conclusion drawn is that these stories were handed down orally for hundreds of years, and by the time they were put into writing they were hopelessly garbled or exaggerated.

This of course is an argument from silence. The Israelites did not write on stone, or clay tablets as did the Assyrians and Babylonians, but on papyrus or leather, and the fact that none of these manuscripts have survived does not prove that they never existed. It has always been customary for Israelite scribes to carefully copy religious manuscripts and deliberately destroy them when they became ragged. It was considered irreverent to keep a sacred manuscript that showed signs of wear.

David and Goliath

Of course the story that has gripped the imagination of children in Sunday School and listeners in churches was the story of David and Goliath. My grandmother made no profession of Christianity. In fact she was a spiritist and attended weekly séances with her dead husband, but she used to hold me spellbound with this dramatic story. I became so identified with it that my name being David, I imagined myself slaying the giant Philistine.

It was the youthful David felling the giant with a stone from his sling. That may not be so fanciful. Five years ago a retired Israeli army general analysed the story and found it very credible. He pointed out that ‘David hastened and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine’ (1 Samuel 17:48). That was good tactics. So long as the Philistine was on the move he would be a difficult target, but when David ran towards him the giant would stop in his tracks waiting to see what this unarmed youth was up to. That gave the young David a stationary target, and the general pointed out that Arab youths with a sling today can hit a jam tin on a post 30 m away.

Another interesting piece of evidence came to light in 2005. Goliath came from the Philistine city of Gath (1 Samuel 17:4). Until recently nobody knew for sure where Gath was but archaeologists excavating at Tell es-Safi found evidence that this was indeed



Valley of Elah, where David fought Goliath.



Picking up a round stone from the wadi in the Valley of Elah.



Sennacherib prism in the British Museum tells how the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem as described in 2 Kings 18:13,14.



One of the squares excavated at Tell es Safi where the ostracoon on which the word 'Goliath' was found.

Gath. They found something else too—an ostracoon (piece of pottery with writing on it) on which was written the name 'Goliath'. Nobody was claiming that this was the giant whom David felled, but it did prove that the name Goliath was known in Gath. It was not just some mythical name concocted by a scribe hundreds of years later.

But the authors will have none of it. 'Centuries of exaggeration and story-telling surely transformed some of the elements, deleted others' (p. 53). Actually there is not a shred of evidence to disprove the story. It is just that some people don't want to believe it.

It is rather surprising to me that the authors scoff at the Bible story of the warrior from Gath 'who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty four in number' (1 Samuel 21:20; p. 56). Surely the authors knew about the 'strawmen' which were found at Ain Ghazal in Jordan who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Anyway such abnormalities are not unknown today. Your doctor will confirm that it occasionally happens as a birth defect.

In another place the authors triumphantly point out the apparent contradiction concerning the death of Goliath. On p. 196 state that in 1 Kings 17:51 it is the youthful David who kills Goliath, but 2 Samuel 21:19 says, 'Elhanan the son of Jaare-Oregim the Bethlehemite killed Goliath the Gittite'. But 1 Chronicles 20:5 plainly states that 'Elhanan ... killed Lahmi the brother of

Goliath'. However, Hebrew scholars such as Gleason Archer have plausibly shown that the difference is due to well known scribal errors, and has no bearing on the inerrancy of the *original God-breathed autographs*, which is all evangelicals claim.²

However the authors cannot escape from the ring of authenticity that is found in Bible history.

'The biblical narrative is filled with so many specific details about trade transactions, monetary values, and complex royal administration that its authors seem to be describing a reality they knew from personal experience' (p. 153).

Yes, that is hard to explain if these stories started out as exaggerated legends passed down from story teller to story teller by camp fires for centuries. No story teller could hope to hold his audience enthralled by recounting all these tedious details. But there they are—seemingly a 'reality they knew from personal experience'.

The authors are also impressed with all the details of Solomon's magnificent temple in Jerusalem. Hardly camp-fire stuff. Try reading it: 'There can hardly be a doubt that the detailed description of the temple in 1 Kings 6-7 was written by an author who had an intimate knowledge of the first temple' (p. 172). Yet they go on to claim that 'We simply do not know who built the first elaborate Temple in Jerusalem' (p. 172).

One outstanding feature that runs throughout the biblical records is the

reports of the injustice, immorality, deceit and crime frankly written about its heroic characters. Noah gets drunk and naked, Abraham told lies to save his skin, David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then callously arranged for her husband to be killed, Solomon disgraced himself with his multiplicity of wives and shameful renunciation of the God who had so mercifully blessed him, etc.

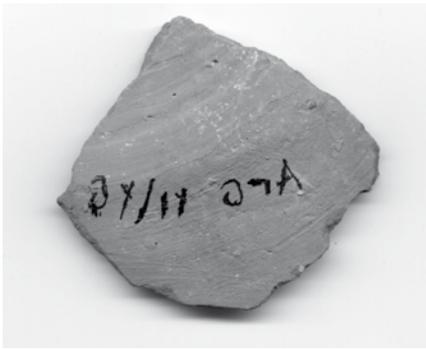
That is something you don't read about in the history of the Pharaohs or the cuneiform inscriptions of Assyrian kings. Their victories in war, the magnificent temples they dedicated to the gods, their magnanimous treatment of their citizens are all there, but not their defeats and shameful failures. That is not natural for human nature. But there it is in the Bible. That rather points to divine origin.

Even the authors find this a perplexing question. 'How can we assess these frankly conflicting biblical evaluations? ... What is the source of this negative view of Solomon? In whose interest was it to blacken the reputation of the great king?' (p. 180).

Of course the authors would not accept the feasibility of biblical prophecy. That would point to divine origin. So the prophecies about the future exile of Israel and Judah must have been written after it all happened—another evidence of later authorship. 'Passages foretelling the exile were inserted throughout the Deuteronomistic History' (p. 213).

It all depends on the dates

But all this criticism depends on one vital factor—chronology! This book could not have been written had the authors not stuck rigidly to the traditional chronology. Actually Finkelstein himself recognizes the fallibility of the generally accepted dates attributed to the archaeological strata. As the result of his excavations at Megiddo, he claimed that the date for the Iron IIA level should be reduced by nearly 100 years. Not all Israeli



Gath ostrakon. The pottery is genuine, the writing is a copy of the ostrakon bearing the name 'Goliath' found at Gath.



One of the straw men found at Ain Ghazal, now in the Amman Museum. Some of these had six fingers and six toes.

archaeologists agree with him, but it needs to be recognized that dates earlier than 700 BC can be challenged.

There are many areas of history where archaeological evidence is contradictory and not even Finkelstein has the answer. In his book *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, p. 341, he wrote,

'The Iron I period again witnessed a dramatic swing in the population of the hill country, this time in the opposite direction ... MB II, Late Bronze and Iron I periods ... leave two critical questions for which satisfactory answers must be found. Why and to where did over half of the MB II population, i.e., virtually all the inhabitants of the hill country, "vanish"? From where did the people who settled the hundreds of sites in Iron I "materialize"?'

He will not find the answer to those questions while he adheres to the traditional chronology. He wrote,

'Establishing a secure chronology for this earliest phase of Israelite history is, as we have seen, extremely difficult. With the lack of datable inscriptions (presumably due to the decline of Egypt and the other major literate powers in this area), the possibility of confirming or precisely dating the biblical events is virtually nil' (p. 71).

There is another factor which proves disagreeable to many Jews: the question of Israel's origin. As now interpreted by archaeology there was no Abraham coming from Ur of the Chaldees, no Exodus from Egypt, no conquest of the promised land by Joshua and his army—Israel was just an offshoot from the Canaanites who originally inhabited the land.

There is however an alternative. Israel's chronology (as far as archaeological findings go) is dependent on the chronology of Egypt and there are some scholars who claim that Egyptian chronology needs to be drastically reduced. This would mean that instead of Israel conquering Canaan's land at the beginning of Iron Age I where there is no evidence to

support it, the conquest would have taken place at the end of the Early Bronze Period where there is stunning evidence that it all happened as the Bible records it.

The time of David and Solomon would not then be in the Iron Age when Jerusalem was 'no more than a highland village' (p. 80). It would have been in the Middle Bronze Age when Palestine was at the height of its power, wealth and culture, and the authors acknowledge that.

'In the Middle Bronze Age, six or seven centuries *before* the estimated time of David, massive walls and towers of an impressive city fortification were built on the eastern slope of the city of David' (p. 274).

That sounds very much like a description of Jerusalem as it would have been in the time of Solomon.

Information on the chronology of Egypt can be found in the article 'Timing is everything'³ and the book *Unwrapping the Pharaohs*.⁴

References

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2. Archer, G.L., Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 82–84, 1982; Sarfati, J., Reply to S. Tamburrino on 'The Extra Cainan', *Journal of Creation* **18**(1):61–62, 2004.
3. Walker, T., Cardno, S. and Sarfati, J., Timing is everything: a talk with field archaeologist David Down, *Creation* **27**(3):30–35, 2005, <www.creationontheweb.com/content/view/4190/>.
4. Ashton, J. and Down, D., *Unwrapping the Pharaohs: How Egyptian chronology confirms the biblical timeline*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, 2006.