



## Book Review

*The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, by Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, edited by Brian B. Schmidt. SBL Archaeology and Biblical Studies 17. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. 2007. Pp. 220. \$24.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Mark Throntveit

The title of this useful volume is somewhat misleading. The “quest” associated with Albert Schweitzer’s similarly titled tome, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, uncovered the folly of attempting to write a biography of Jesus using the tools of historical inquiry. Finkelstein (Tel Aviv University) and Mazar (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), two of the brightest Israeli lights on the contemporary archaeological scene, actually provide a reasonable glimpse into the value of judicious archaeological interpretation of the material culture of the Levant as a helpful tool in the reconstruction of what “historical Israel” may (or may not!) have looked like.

But it is hardly a debate; one of the greatest strengths of this volume is the “centrist” perspective both advocate as opposed to the so-called “maximalist” views of Kitchen and others on the right and the “minimalist” views of Thompson, Lemche, and Davies on the left, that tends to dominate current discussion of these matters.<sup>1</sup> Rather, Brian Schmidt (University of Michigan) has taken the invited lectures of Finkelstein and Mazar at the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, held in Detroit in October of 2005 and delivered to an educated but non-specialist audience, and repackaged them for classroom use.

By way of caution, however, the book is probably only accessible to teachers and would not make for good student reading, unless the intended class exhibited both exceptional reading and critical thinking skills. Excerpts or individual chapters that the teacher could preface with appropriate background knowledge, however, might be useful case studies.

The opening and closing sections of Schmidt’s six part arrangement provide the reader with a clearly articulated introduction to the basic presuppositions regarding the relationship between archaeology and the biblical text that these scholars hold. While both steer clear of the minimalist and maximalist extremes mentioned above, Mazar assigns a greater role to the evidence of the biblical text that does preserve ancient material in its later formulation than Finkelstein, who notes that archaeology is our only “real-time witness” to many of the events described in the text (19). Thus, for Finkelstein, archaeology essentially trumps the later and therefore tendentious biblical witness.

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<sup>1</sup>As an aside, the terms “maximalist” and “minimalist” – admittedly caricatures – refer to the degree to which scholars accept the biblical narratives as trustworthy historical sources. Minimalists typically regard the biblical materials suspiciously and tend to be less confident in using these sources as sure footing for historical reconstruction. Maximalists, contrariwise, tend to exhibit a higher level of confidence in the biblical texts’ usefulness in reconstructing history.

These front and end chapters, which effectively situate the following discussion, frame four others that survey four basic periods of ancient Israel (Patriarchs, Settlement, United Monarchy, and Divided Monarchy). All have the same pedagogically useful format in which Schmidt provides an introductory summary of Finkelstein and Mazar's following essays. Their common belief that the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy), Deuteronomistic History (Joshua-2 Kings),<sup>2</sup> and many prophets were compiled and edited in the late monarchy, not in the Persian (539-332 BCE) or Hellenistic periods (332-63 BCE) as revisionists claim, is the most significant of their shared presuppositions.

This volume would serve the needs of introductory college-level Bible classes admirably. As mentioned above, it could provide a suitable challenge for advanced secondary-level students, or background reading for a teacher interested in the relationship between archaeology and the Bible. The relatively non-technical presentations, coupled with Schmidt's informative introductions, and the essential importance of the periods covered, further enhance its attractiveness. But how should it be used?

"Deciding who is right" (the minimalists or the maximalists) may not be the best pedagogical goal. The students may have little previous experience with such material or lines of argument. The troubling consequences to one's faith, when the cherished historicity of the biblical text is confronted by the *bruta facta* frequently uncovered by archaeological investigation, are another consideration. Schmidt's accurate summaries, devoid of such evaluation, lead by example, here.

Better, would be to let the clearly presented articles of the two scholars draw the students into discussions of the proper relationship between the biblical text, extra-biblical inscriptions, material culture, and the like. In this regard, "Part 4: The Tenth Century: The New Litmus Test for the Bible's Historical Relevance," holds particular promise, and for a number of reasons:

1. The debate as to the existence of a Solomonic Age or a United Monarchy as described in the historical books of the Old Testament, not to mention the existence of such pivotal figures as David and Solomon themselves, is at the center of such discussions these days. It is an interesting question with palpable repercussions.
2. There is a wide range of scholarly opinion stretching from belief in the Bible's essential historical accuracy to utter denial of the existence of David, Solomon, or a supposed "Golden Age." These positions are often dependent upon prior decisions made regarding the relative balance between the Bible and archaeology.
3. While Finkelstein and Mazar fit between these extremes, they do display their greatest diversity in this period. Mazar uses a "Modified Conventional Chronology" to claim there was a united monarchy under David and

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<sup>2</sup> The "Deuteronomistic History" is a scholarly hypothesis that states that the books of Deuteronomy-2 Kings were compiled and edited by a single author sometime in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. These books were edited from the theological perspectives presented in the book of Deuteronomy, which serves as an introduction to Joshua-2 Kings.

Solomon. How else does one explain Shishak's campaign list? Finkelstein employs a "Low Chronology" to collapse the tenth and ninth centuries and argue that while they were both tribal chiefs in the south their rule could not have resembled the Deuteronomistic portrayal of Samuel-Kings that likely reflects the northern Omride Dynasty of the ninth century, and reflects the expectations of Josiah's desire to rule Israel and Judah.

Perhaps the governing discussion question should be, "Discuss the problems involved in writing a history of the United Monarchy" as there are problems with both sides. A key concept in all these discussions is the troublesome nature of negative evidence, as depicted in the old chiasmic saw, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." The absence of any extra-biblical evidence of David or Solomon, apart from the disputed Tel Dan inscription (*bytdwd*, possibly Aramaic for "House (Dynasty) of David"), would be especially relevant at this point. Other, less central discussions could revolve around "What criteria would help to discern the relative weight of textual to archaeological evidence?" and "What advantages does 'centrist' position, such as that advocated by Finkelstein and Mazar, provide those engaged in the writing of Israel's history?"

We are not at the end of the debate between biblical text and archaeological discovery that has raged without consensus for these many years. Nevertheless, those charged with leading students through the vagaries of this problematic area, or simply fascinated by the topic, will be well served by this useful primer.

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