

A Great United Monarchy?

Archaeological and Historical Perspectives*

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Twelve years have passed since I first presented – to the German Institute in Jerusalem – my ideas on the chronology of the Iron Age strata in the Levant and how it impacts on our understanding of the biblical narrative on the United Monarchy of ancient Israel.¹ I was naïve enough then to believe that the logic of my ‘correction’ was straightforward and clear. Twelve years and many articles and public debates later, however, the notion of Davidic conquests, Solomonic building projects, and a glamorous United Monarchy – all based on an uncritical reading of the biblical text and in contradiction of archaeological finds – is still alive in certain quarters. This paper presents my updated views on this matter, and tackles several recent claims that archaeology has now proven the historicity of the biblical account of the great kingdom of David and Solomon.

The Traditional Theory

The quest for the United Monarchy has been the most spectacular venture of ‘classical’ biblical archaeology.² The obvious place to begin the search was Jerusalem. Yet Jerusalem proved elusive: the nature of the site made it difficult to peel away the layers of later centuries and the Temple Mount has always been beyond the reach of archaeologists.

The search was therefore diverted to other sites, primarily Megiddo, specifically mentioned in 1 Kings 9:15 as having been built by Solomon. Starting over a century ago, Megiddo became the focus of the

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1 Finkelstein (1996).

2 E.g., Yadin (1970); Dever (1997).

endeavor to make flesh and bones of the great Solomonic kingdom. As a prologue and homage to German scholarship, let me say that as far as I can judge, regarding Megiddo the closest to the truth was Carl Watzinger, who published the finds from the Schumacher excavations – the first investigation of the site in the early days of the 20th century. In a relatively early stage of research Watzinger suggested that the late Iron I stratum at Megiddo was destroyed by Pharaoh Shishak in the late 10th century BCE.³ This proposal was not far from today's Low Chronology for the Iron Age strata, now backed by several hundred radiocarbon measurements.⁴

Nevertheless, this correct notion was forgotten two years later, when the University of Chicago team began promoting its ideas regarding Solomon at Megiddo. Based on the Solomon-Megiddo link in 1 Kings 9:15 and on the mention in 1 Kings 9:19 of Solomon's cities for chariots and horses, P.L.O. Guy identified a set of pillared buildings found close to the surface of the mound as stables built by Solomon.⁵ The 'stables' paradigm dominated scholarship for almost 30 years, until Yigael Yadin started excavating at Hazor. Yadin noticed the similarity between the six-chambered city-gate that he uncovered at Hazor, the one at Megiddo that the University of Chicago's team had uncovered, and the one at Gezer unearthed by Macalister. Based on 1 Kings 9:15, Yadin described the three gates as blueprint architecture of the Solomonic era.⁶ Yadin proceeded to carry out soundings at Megiddo and revised the Oriental Institute team's stratigraphy and historical interpretation.⁷ He proposed that in addition to the gate, Solomonic Megiddo is represented by two palaces built of ashlar blocks – one discovered in the 1920s and the other partially traced by him in the 1960s (and almost fully excavated in the course of the renewed excavations at Megiddo in recent years⁸). Two additional finds at Megiddo seemed to support Yadin's interpretation: The major city that had existed before the city of the palaces – the last layer that features 'Canaanite' material culture – was destroyed by a massive conflagration, and the next city, built over the palaces, featured the famous Megiddo stables. Yadin's interpretation seemed to fit the biblical testimony perfectly:

3 Watzinger (1929).

4 Sharon et al. (2007).

5 Guy (1931).

6 Yadin (1958; 1970).

7 Yadin (1970).

8 Cline (2006).

- 1) Late Iron I (Canaanite) Megiddo was devastated by King David ca. 1000 BCE;⁹
- 2) The palaces represent the Golden Age of King Solomon; their destruction by fire should be attributed to the campaign of Pharaoh Sheshonq I (Shishak) in the late 10th century BCE (Megiddo is mentioned in Sheshonq I's list at Karnak and a fragment of a stele placed by him at the site was found by the University of Chicago team);
- 3) The stables date to the days of King Ahab in the early 9th century BCE; Ahab is reported by Shalmaneser III to have faced the Assyrian army at Qarqar with a mighty force of 2000 chariots.

Yadin's interpretation became the standard theory on the United Monarchy.¹⁰ It matched the view expressed by most biblical scholars of his time, who argued that the (much later) biblical author had access to archival material from the 10th century BCE.¹¹ After all, they said, the Bible refers to a palace scribe and other administrators at the time of David and Solomon.

Why The Traditional Theory Was Wrong

The idea of a Solomonic archive in Jerusalem was a mirage. First, it was caught in a circular argument: There is genuine information about the 10th century > because there was an archive in Jerusalem > because a court-scribe is mentioned in the Bible. Second, it has now been dismissed by archaeology; a century and half of excavations in Jerusalem and all other major Judahite sites has provided no evidence for meaningful scribal activity before the late 8th century BCE. Recently found 10th and 9th century BCE late proto-Canaanite and Philistean inscriptions at Khirbet Qeiyafa and Tel Zayit in the Shephelah seem to belong to a lowland polity of the time (below).¹²

Yadin's archaeology paradigm on the United Monarchy has also been proven wrong. It was entangled in a web of serious problems from the outset. First, the city-gate at Megiddo must have been built later than the gates at Hazor and Gezer, as it connects to a wall that

⁹ Cf. recently Harrison (2004), 108.

¹⁰ E.g., Mazar (1997); Dever (1997); Ben-Tor (2000); Stager (2003).

¹¹ E.g., Na'aman (1997a) and bibliography.

¹² Garfinkel/Ganor (2008); Tappy et al. (2006).

runs over the two palaces;¹³ Megiddo does not have an Iron IIA fortification. Second, similar city-gates have been discovered at other places, among them sites that date to late monarchic times, centuries after Solomon (e.g., Tel Ira in the Beer-sheba Valley), and sites built outside the borders of the great United Monarchy even according to the maximalist view (Ashdod and Khirbet Mudayna eth-Themed in Moab).

No less important, all three pillars of Yadin's theory do not withstand thorough scrutiny. Yadin described the identification of Solomonic architecture as follows:

"Our decision to attribute that layer to Solomon was based primarily on the 1 Kings passage, the stratigraphy and the pottery. But when in addition we found in that stratum a six-chambered, two-towered gate connected to a casemate wall identical in plan and measurement with the gate at Megiddo, we felt sure we had successfully identified Solomon's city."¹⁴

We need to deal, then, with stratigraphy, chronology, and the biblical passage. **Needless to say, stratigraphy provides only relative chronology and the same holds true for pottery.** Regarding the latter, archaeologists have committed the ultimate mistake. William Dever argued that the Solomonic strata at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer were not dated because of the association with the biblical text, but according to a well-defined family of vessels – red slipped and burnished – which dates to the 10th century BCE.¹⁵ He based this statement on Holladay's study of the Gezer pottery:

"The key stratum seems to be Gezer Field III Phase UG3A, which is both very short and historically exceptionally well positioned. It comes after the Solomonic building period, richly documented by biblical and historical data and secured by comparative regional archaeological and architectural criteria combined with comparative pottery criteria."¹⁶

In simpler words, the key stratum was dated by the pottery > the pottery was dated by its relationship to the six-chambered gate > which was, in turn, dated according to the biblical testimony to the days of Solomon – another clear example of circular reasoning.

So, we are back to square one. Stratigraphy and pottery tell us nothing when it comes to absolute chronology. In order to reach a date according to traditional archaeology we need a find that would anchor the archaeology of Israel to the well-dated dating systems of Egypt and Assyria. The problem is, there is no such anchor for the 10th century BCE; in fact, no such anchor exists between the mid 12th and the late

13 Ussishkin (1980).

14 Yadin (1970), 67.

15 For instance, Dever (1997), 237–239.

16 Holladay (1990), 62–63.

8th century BCE – over four centuries in the Iron Age. The fragment of the Shoshenq I stele found in the 1920s at Megiddo could have given us such an anchor had it been found in-situ and the same holds true for the Mesha stele from Dibon in Moab and the Hazael Inscription from Tel Dan. Yet, all three were found out of context. This means that the traditional connection between the remains on the ground and the historical sequence is based on a single biblical reference (1 Kings 9:15). In other words, the entire reconstruction of the great Solomonic state – by Yadin and others – has been based on a single verse.

Let us take a look at this verse. I will argue later, based on archaeology, that in the 10th century BCE the early Davidides could not have ruled beyond the central highlands and its immediate vicinity. But even if they had, with no archival material, how could the late 7th century BCE author know about building activities in the mid-10th century BCE? One possibility is that the author projected a recollection of a situation closer to his days into the distant past in order to advance his ideology. He could have deployed a memory of the three important administrative cities of the Northern Kingdom in the lowlands in the first half of the 8th century BCE – Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer – in order to convey his Pan-Israelite notion that the great Solomon ruled from Jerusalem over the entire country, including the lands of the Northern Kingdom (in his time already long destroyed), and that ruling over these territories was, thereby, not only the legitimate right of kings in his own era but also the right of future Davidic Kings.

To sum-up this point, Yadin's affiliation of the Megiddo palaces to the days of Solomon based on 'the 1 Kings passage, the stratigraphy and the pottery' does not withstand modern archaeological and biblical scrutiny.

The traditional dating system raises additional historical and archaeological problems:

1. The rise of territorial states in the Levant was an outcome of the westward expansion of the Assyrian empire in the early 9th century BCE. Extra-biblical sources leave little doubt that all major states in the region – Aram Damascus, Moab, and northern Israel – emerged in the 9th century BCE. It is difficult to envision a great empire ruled from the marginal region of the southern highlands a century before this process.

2. Affiliating the destruction of the Megiddo palaces with the campaign of Pharaoh Sheshonq I leaves no destruction layers in the north

for the well-documented assault of Hazael, king of Aram Damascus, on the Northern Kingdom in the mid-9th century BCE.¹⁷

3. The traditional dating of the Iron Age strata in the Levant raises serious problems in any attempt to synchronize the archaeology of the Levant with that of northern Syria and the Aegean basin.¹⁸

4. Local inconsistencies also exist and are best manifested by the Kefar Veradim tomb. This tomb, in the north of Israel, yielded an Assyrian-shaped bronze bowl with a late-Proto-Canaanite inscription and Iron IIA pottery assemblage.¹⁹ Such bowls do not appear before the 9th century BCE. As noted by Benjamin Sass, applying the traditional chronology results in an absurd situation in which the inscription is dated to the 11th century, the pottery to the 10th and the bowl (by comparison) to the 9th century BCE.²⁰

5. Most annoying, over a century of archaeological explorations in Jerusalem – the capital of the glamorous biblical United Monarchy – failed to reveal evidence for any meaningful 10th-century building activity. The famous stepped stone structure – usually presented as the most important United Monarchy remain²¹ – demonstrates continuous construction effort which aimed at supporting the steep eastern slope of the City of David. Pottery dating to the 9th century BCE was found between the courses of its earliest sector, while its upper part was probably reconstructed in Hellenistic times, in order to support the First Wall of the Hasmonean period.²² The common pretext for the absence of 10th century remains in Jerusalem – that they were eradicated by later activity – should be brushed aside: monumental fortifications from both the Middle Bronze and late monarchic times (that is, the 16th and 8th centuries BCE) did survive later occupations. This means that 10th-century Jerusalem was no more than a small, remote highlands village, not the exquisitely decked out capital of a great empire.²³ Recent attempts to save a Solomonic empire ruled from a poor capital in Jerusalem by comparing it to the Zulu in Africa or to Ghenghis Khan in Mongolia²⁴ show nothing else than the absurd in such comparisons. For temporal, geographical, and functional reasons, Solomonic Jerusalem

17 Na'aman (1997b).

18 Mazzoni (2000), 121; Coldstream (2003) respectively.

19 Alexander (2002).

20 Sass (2005), 39.

21 For instance, Cahill (2003); Mazar (2006).

22 Finkelstein et al. (2007); the building identified by Eilat Mazar as the palace of King David will be dealt with below.

23 Finkelstein (2001); Ussishkin (2003).

24 Faust (2004).

may be compared to Omride Samaria, to Hammah, or to Zincirli – not to the Zulu.

To sum-up this point, a brief contemplation of the circular argumentations behind the traditional theory and the difficulties that I have just mentioned is sufficient for understanding that something was fundamentally wrong with the conventional dating, and thereby conventional theory regarding the United Monarchy.

Fixing Iron Age Chronology

So much for the negative evidence. Other straightforward clues come from two sites related to the Omride dynasty – Samaria in the highlands and Jezreel in the valley.

Ashlar blocks uncovered in the foundations of one of the so-called ‘Solomonic’ palaces at Megiddo carry unique masons’ marks, found in one other building in Israel: the 9th century palace of Omri and Ahab at Samaria. As noted long ago by Fisher, Crowfoot and recently by Franklin,²⁵ these masons’ marks are so distinctive that they must have been executed by the same group of masons. But one palace was dated to the 10th century (Megiddo) and the other to the 9th century BCE (Samaria). There are only two alternatives here: either to push the Megiddo building ahead to the 9th century, or to pull the Samaria palace back to the 10th century BCE. The biblical source on the building of Samaria by King Omri must be a reliable one, since it is supported by Assyrian texts that relate to the Northern Kingdom as *bit omri* – the typical genre of relating to a kingdom after the founder of its capital. Therefore, down-dating Megiddo is the only option.

The excavations at Jezreel, located less than ten miles to the east of Megiddo, revealed equally surprising results: The destruction layer of the royal compound there, dated to the mid-9th century BCE, yielded a rich collection of vessels identical to a Megiddo assemblage that was conventionally dated to the late 10th century BCE.²⁶ Ben-Tor suggested that the restorable pottery found in the casemates of the Jezreel compound in fact date to an earlier layer there.²⁷ Yet, this means that the upheaval of large scale leveling operations, transportation of fills, and the construction of the casemates left an earlier assemblage of restorable vessels intact exactly in the lines of the later casemates; needless to

25 Fisher (1929), 58; Crowfoot (1940), 146; Franklin (2005).

26 Zimhoni (1997), 25–26, 38–39.

27 Ben-Tor (2000).

say, this is difficult to comprehend. So here again, one can either push the Megiddo assemblage or pull the Jezreel one. Since the Jezreel compound is architecturally identical to that of Samaria, it must date to the 9th century BCE. In this case, too, only one option remains: down-dating the Megiddo palaces to the 9th century BCE.

Another clue may come from Egypt. Stephan Münger has dealt with a group of 'mass produced' Egyptian amulets found in large numbers in the Levant.²⁸ They seem to have been mass-produced in the Delta in the time of Pharaohs Siamun and Sheshonq I. Yet, in Israel these amulets appear for the first time in late-Iron I layers, which were previously dated to the 11th century BCE. At Dor, five such amulets were found in one room with a late Iron I pottery assemblage.²⁹ Some objections to this idea may be sound,³⁰ but Münger's theory remains a valid (if not the preferable) possibility for dating these amulets.

Radiocarbon Results

In recent years a large number of samples from Iron Age strata have been subjected to ¹⁴C dating procedures. In order to resolve the debate on the dating of the Iron Age strata in the Levant, two questions needed to be dealt with: When did the Iron IIA – the ceramic phase which characterizes the strata which have traditionally been affiliated with the time of Solomon – begin and when did it end (traditionally the Solomonic period is dated to 970–931 BCE and the Iron IIA to ca. 1000–925 BCE)?

A short while after the introduction of ¹⁴C dating to the Iron Age debate, it became clear that the Iron IIA continued at least until the second half of the 9th century BCE – a century later than the traditional dating.³¹ In other words, destruction layers that were conventionally dated to the late 10th century and associated with the campaign of Pharaoh Sheshonq I, provide ¹⁴C dates in the mid-to-late 9th century BCE and should therefore be linked to Hazael's assault on the Northern Kingdom.³² The Megiddo palaces, which constituted the backbone of the traditional approach to the United Monarchy, belong to the late

28 Münger (2003).

29 Gilboa et al. (2004).

30 Brandl in a lecture at an Oxford 2004 conference.

31 Mazar/Carmi (2001); Sharon (2001); this is in line with the initial, pre-radiocarbon low chronology proposal, which was based on archaeological and historical considerations – Finkelstein (1996).

32 Na'aman (1997b); Finkelstein/Piasetzky (2007a).

Iron IIA ceramic phase.³³ In absolute chronology terms this means that they date to the first half of the 9th century BCE.

This left only one question to be resolved: the beginning of the Iron IIA, or, in other words, the date of the transition from the late Iron I to the early Iron IIA. In a recent publication, Sharon et al. have dealt with this transition,³⁴ which was put by the traditionalists in 1000 BCE, by Mazar's Modified Conventional Chronology in 980 BCE³⁵ and by me in the second half of the 10th century BCE. Based on 385 measurements, from 21 sites, measured in three laboratories by three different methods, Sharon et al. put the transition in the second half of the 10th century BCE. According to them, of the 36 possible statistical interpretations of these results, 35 fit the Low Chronology and one falls in between, without supporting the traditional chronology. A few years earlier Eliezer Piasezky and I estimated a less than 1% probability that the High Chronology hypothesis is correct.³⁶ In a recent article, Mazar and Bronk Ramsey have attempted to retain a date for the Iron I/IIA transition in the first half of the 10th century BCE.³⁷ But their selection of data for the study can be disputed. According to their own numbers, it is sufficient to exclude the charcoal samples (which introduce the 'old wood effect') and run the numbers with the short-lived samples (that is, grain seeds, olive pits, etc.) in order to place this transition in the second half of the 10th century BCE. To sum-up this point, all 12 Bayesian models (using only short-lived samples) available today put the Iron I/IIA transition in the late 10th century BCE (Table 1); they support the Low Chronology for the Iron Age strata and negate Mazar's Modified Conventional Chronology as well as the proposal by Herzog and Singer-Avitz to put this transition in the mid-10th century BCE.³⁸

33 Herzog/Singer-Avitz (2006).

34 Sharon et al. (2007).

35 Mazar (2005).

36 Finkelstein/Piasezky (2003).

37 Mazar/Bronk Ramsey (2008).

38 Mazar (2005); Herzog/Singer-Avitz (2004; 2006).

Model	Dates [68% range]	Reference
Focused/combined	925–885	Sharon et al. 2007
Focused/uncombined	900–870	
Focused/cautious	935–895	
Composite/combined	925–895	
Composite/uncombined	915–900	
Composite/cautious	925–900	
Coarse/combined	955–925	
Coarse/uncombined	930–910	
Coarse/cautious	940–905	
Model B3*	940–917	Mazar/Bronk
Model C3*	948–919	Ramsey 2008
New, unpublished work	916–900	Finkelstein/ Piasetzky, in press
* Using only short-lived samples		

Table 1: All available Bayesian models for the Iron I/IIA transition

To sum-up this point, the radiocarbon results support what I have suggested over the last twelve years: 1) The supposed time of the United Monarchy is covered by the late Iron I, which, in the north, is still influenced by Late Bronze (that is, ‘Canaanite’) material culture;³⁹ 2) The Israelite expansion into the northern valleys took place in the late 10th century BCE;⁴⁰ and 3) The so-called ‘Solomonic’ monuments were in fact built by the Omrides.⁴¹

Excursus I: Arguments Raised Against The Alternative Dating

Some have tried to gain a moment of fame by attempting to participate in the fiery chronology debate, with results that are quite amusing and that demonstrate a misunderstanding of the issue. Harrison’s long discussion of the Megiddo evidence is meaningless, as it is based on the traditional arguments: King David destroyed Megiddo VIA; Solomon built Megiddo VA–IVB, etc.⁴² And Gal’s statement that “the identifica-

39 Finkelstein (2003).

40 Finkelstein/Piasetzky (2007b).

41 Finkelstein (2000).

42 Harrison (2003).

tion of Horvat Rosh Zayit with biblical Cabul [...] and its association with the 'Land of Cabul' relate it to both King Solomon and Hiram of Tyre [...] thus providing it with an appropriate historical-geographical basis"⁴³ (he means chronological basis) is a clear manifestation of circular reasoning.

But there have also been serious challenges, which needed to be addressed:

1. The *Taanach* argument of Lawrence Stager:⁴⁴ Pharaoh Sheshonq I, who campaigned in Palestine in the second half of the 10th century BCE, mentions Taanach in his Karnak list. According to Stager, Taanach features only one destruction layer – the one corresponding to a Megiddo stratum, which is traditionally dated to the 10th century BCE. Yet, a reevaluation of the Taanach finds points to an earlier stratum that was also destroyed in a fierce fire.⁴⁵ This provides a conflagration layer at Taanach for whoever is seeking a Sheshonq destruction.

2. The *density of strata* argument, raised by Mazar and Ben-Tor.⁴⁶ If the date of 10th century strata is lowered to the early 9th century BCE, too many strata are left in northern Israel for the relatively short period of time until the Assyrian takeover in 732 BCE. There are several answers to this argument: First, the traditional dating does the same to earlier strata; second, the number of strata depends on the quality of excavations; third, the history of border sites (such as Hazor – the subject of Ben-Tor's complaint) was more turbulent than that of inland sites (such as Megiddo).

3. The *how can you accept one biblical testimony and reject another* argument.⁴⁷ Put simply, the question is, how can one reject the historicity of the biblical testimony on the building activities of Solomon and at the same time accept the historicity of the verses on the construction of Samaria by Omri. There are two answers to this question: First, accepting the historicity of one verse and rejecting another is exactly the nature of two centuries of biblical scholarship. Second, the biblical description of the Solomonic state is idealized, with many references to realities of much later times in Israelite history,⁴⁸ while the description of the Omride state is far more accurate historically – and this includes, of course, the important Elijah and Elishah cycles in Kings.

43 Gal (2003), 149.

44 Stager (2003), 66.

45 Finkelstein (1998).

46 Mazar (1997), 163; Ben-Tor (2000).

47 E.g., Mazar (1999), 40, n. 38; Ben-Tor (2000), 12, 14.

48 For instance, Knauf (1991).

4. Several scholars, primarily William Dever, suggested that the Low Chronology camp is a minority.⁴⁹ The truth is, I am far from being troubled by the idea of being part of a minority that defends a case which, so I believe, is supported by the evidence. Just to set the record straight, however, among the small group of scholars who understand the intricate archaeological arguments behind the debate, the supporters of the Low Chronology make an impressive group.⁵⁰ Looking at the Dream Team on my side I can only hope to always be able to stand with a similar minority. Incidentally, all defections are from the traditional 'majority' to the Low Chronology 'minority'. Dever himself has recently started his long, cold voyage of defection: "Caution is indicated at the moment; but one should allow the possibility of slightly lower 10th–9th centuries BCE dates."⁵¹

Excursus II: Traditional Biblical Archaeology Strikes Back

Several scholars have recently come forward with new revelations, which ostensibly support the traditional interpretation of the biblical material on the time of David and Solomon.

A King David Palace in Jerusalem

A few massive walls recently unearthed in the City of David have been dated by excavator Eilat Mazar to the 10th century BCE and interpreted as the remains of the palace of King David; Mazar connected these remains to the Stepped Stone Structure on the eastern slope of the City of David.⁵² She bases her identification of the building on a few Iron IIA pottery items found in one spot in her dig area and on a highly literal reading of the biblical text: Melchizedek of Genesis 14 was a Middle Bronze ruler of Jerusalem; Adonizedek of Joshua 10 was a Late Bronze monarch there; and David's palace is identified according to the topography in 2 Samuel 5. Not only is this an uncritical reading of biblical texts, archaeology does not support Mazar's interpretation.⁵³

49 Dever (2001), 68.

50 See temporary and far from complete list in Finkelstein/Silberman (2002), 66–67.

51 From the abstract of his lecture at a 2004 Oxford conference.

52 E. Mazar (2007a).

53 Cf. in detail Finkelstein et al. (2007); moreover, the palace of the early Davidides must have been located – in line with all capitals of the ancient Near Eastern territorial kingdoms – in the ruling compound, that is, on the Temple Mount.

- The walls unearthed by Mazar do not connect into one coherent plan and seem to belong to more than one building.
- Since the entire area had been excavated in the past, the dating of the remains is difficult. Some of the walls may be affiliated with the Iron IIA, in the 9th century BCE; others may date as late as the Hellenistic period.
- The Iron IIA pottery items found in one spot are not necessarily in situ and in any event date to the 9th century BCE.
- The Stepped Stone Structure on the slope has at least two construction phases: one in the Iron IIA or early Iron IIB (9th or early 8th centuries BCE) and the second in the Hellenistic period.

The Iron IIA construction effort in the City of David – the early stage of the Stepped Stone Structure and possibly some of the walls unearthed by Eilat Mazar – indeed manifest a phase in the development of the state in Judah, but this phase dates to the 9th rather than 10th centuries BCE and has nothing to do with the biblical United Monarchy.

Khirbet en-Nahas and King Solomon's Mines

Levy et al. have recently suggested affiliating the copper production site of Khirbet en-Nahas in the Araba valley south of the Dead Sea with biblical Edom and dating the large square fortress there to the 10th century BCE.⁵⁴ Accordingly, they argued that Edom emerged to statehood as early as the 10th century BCE, thereby seeing the verses in Gen. 36:31 and 2 Sam. 8:14 as historical. They also hinted that the copper production at Khirbet en-Nahas may be linked to the biblically-described King Solomon's mines.⁵⁵ This is not so, because:

- Khirbet en-Nahas is not located in Edom. Production at Nahas is radiocarbon-dated between the late 12th and late 9th centuries BCE,⁵⁶ that is, in the Iron I and Iron IIA. In the Iron IIA – the peak period of production – there was not a single settlement on the Edomite plateau. All sites there date later, from the late 8th and 7th centuries BCE.⁵⁷ The Khirbet en-Nahas phenomenon connects to the settlement history of the Beer-sheba Valley to its west – along the roads that carried the copper to the Mediterranean ports, international roads of the coastal plain, and Egypt. The most significant

54 Levy et al. (2004; 2008).

55 Levy et al. (2008), 16465.

56 Levy et al. (2004; 2008); Finkelstein/Piasetzky (2008).

57 Bienkowski (1992).

site in the Beer-sheba Valley that may be mentioned in relation to the copper production at Khirbet en-Nahas is Iron I and IIA Tel Masos, which yielded evidence for copper production and trade.⁵⁸

- Based on comparison to the forts of En Hatzeva on the western side of the Araba and Tell el-Kheleifeh at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, the fort at Khirbet en-Nahas seems to date to the late 8th or 7th century BCE.
- Regarding the biblical material, Levy et al. take the list of the kings “who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites” in Gen. 36:31 as historical testimony of the existence of a territorial polity there in the 12th and 11th centuries BCE; and the reference in 2 Sam. 8:14 to garrisons put by King David in Edom as reflecting a 10th century BCE reality.⁵⁹ It is true that some scholars accepted the list in Genesis 36 as containing genuine historical information,⁶⁰ yet, the list may represent a post-monarchic situation in Edom,⁶¹ a late Iron II reality,⁶² or may altogether refer to Aramean (rather than Edomite) kings.⁶³ And the reference to Edom in 2 Samuel 8 most likely depicts an 8th century BCE reality, reflected back to the time of the founder of the Jerusalem dynasty.⁶⁴

Therefore, Khirbet en-Nahas is not connected to the biblically narrated United Monarchy of ancient Israel.

The Tel Zayit Abecedary and Literacy in 10th century BCE Jerusalem

The recently discovered Tel Zayit abecedary has been dated to the 10th century BCE and interpreted as evidence for literacy in Jerusalem at that time:

“In view of the well-established archaeo-paleographic chronology of the Tel Zayit inscription [...] and the clear cultural affiliation of its archaeological context with the Judaeen highlands, we may reasonably associate it with the nascent kingdom of Judah [...] the appearance of an abecedary in an outlying town some distance from the capital city of Jerusalem demon-

58 See in details, Finkelstein (2005).

59 Levy et al. (2005), 158–159.

60 For instance Westermann (1986), 561.

61 Knauf (1985).

62 Bartlett (1989), 94–102.

63 Lemaire (2001).

64 Na’aman (2002), 214.

states a movement toward literacy in the extreme western frontier of the kingdom during the mid-tenth century B.C.E."⁶⁵

This is not so, because:⁶⁶

- The archaeological context of the abecedary puts it no earlier than the late 10th century BCE and more likely in the course of the 9th century BCE.
- The pottery and other finds from Tel Zayit cannot help in establishing the territorial affiliation of the site – with Judah or with the coastal plain.
- The Tel Zayit abecedary belongs to a group of Late Proto-Canaanite and Philistian inscriptions from the southern coastal plain and the Shephelah, which continue Late Bronze III Egyptian administrative tradition in this region. Not a single inscription of this type has ever been found in the territory of Judah.
- Tel Zayit was a peripheral town in the territory of the strong Iron I–Iron IIA kingdom of Gath.

Therefore, the Tel Zayit abecedary is important for the study of the history and culture of the southern lowlands; it has nothing to do with the rise of Judah or with literacy in Judah in the Iron IIA.

Khirbet Qeiyafa and the David and Goliath Tradition

Garfinkel and Ganor have recently dated a casemate wall which they excavated at Khirbet Qeiyafa in the valley of Elah in the Shephelah to the early Iron IIA. Based on ¹⁴C samples they put this phase in the Iron Age sequence in the early part of the 10th century BCE. Garfinkel and Ganor labeled a late proto-Canaanite inscription found at the site as the earliest Hebrew inscription known thus far, interpreted the finds at this site as supporting the biblical description of the United Monarchy, and connected the site to the David and Goliath story in 1 Samuel.⁶⁷

This is far more complicated, because:

- The pottery assemblage from Khirbet Qeiyafa seems to belong to the late Iron I/early Iron IIA transition.
- The four ¹⁴C determinations from Qeiyafa provide an average uncalibrated date of 2844±15 BP, which translates to 1026–944 BCE (68% probability). This date fits the results for the late Iron I strata in

⁶⁵ Tappy et al. (2006), 42.

⁶⁶ Cf. in detail Finkelstein et al. (2008).

⁶⁷ Garfinkel/Ganor (2008).

both the north (e.g., Megiddo VIA) and the south (Qasile X). Note that the latest Iron I destructions in the north provide an uncalibrated date of 2794 ± 10 , which translates to 941–915 BCE,⁶⁸ while several early Iron IIA sites both in the north and in the south provide still later dates.⁶⁹

- The date of the casemate wall depends on its association with this late Iron I pottery found on bedrock, inside the fortification line, and on Hellenistic pottery found in several locations related to the fortification system. One should wait for additional results in order to reach an accurate dating. Even if the fortification indeed dates to the late Iron I/early Iron IIA, this phenomenon is not unique: contemporary or even somewhat earlier fortifications are known at Khirbet el-Umeiri in Ammon, several sites in Moab, and Khirbet ed-Dawwara a few kms northeast of Jerusalem.
- In the late Iron I/early Iron IIA the site could have been the westernmost outpost of Judah or the easternmost outpost in the territory of nearby (nearer than Jerusalem) Philistine Gath, which was the largest and most important city-state in southern Israel at that time.⁷⁰
- Any proposal regarding the 'ethnic', or territorial affiliation of Qeiyafa should weigh many factors, such as the culinary practices as revealed by the faunal assemblage, the typology of the pottery, the provenance of the pottery, the nature of the ostrakon (below), etc. All this should be compared to the finds in other contemporary lowlands sites.⁷¹
- Plotting all late proto-Canaanite and Philistean inscriptions from southern Canaan on a map, it becomes evident that they are all concentrated in the southern coastal plain and the Shephelah, mainly in or near the territory of Philistine Gath.⁷² These include the inscriptions from Qubur el-Walaidah, Tell es-Safi/Gath, Tel Zayit, Khirbet Qeiyafa, Beth-shemesh, Gezer and Izbet Sartah. Not a single one was found in Judah proper. This territory was the hub of the Late Bronze III Egyptian administration in Canaan and the concentration of the inscriptions may reflect a lasting administrative and cultural tradition in this region.
- Making straight forward connection between this site and the biblical tradition on the duel between David and Goliath takes archaeo-

68 Finkelstein/Piasetzky (2007b).

69 See, e.g., Boaretto et al. (in press); Finkelstein/Piasetzky (in press).

70 Uziel/Maeir (2005).

71 Na'aman (2008).

72 For instance, Finkelstein et al. (2008).

logy back a century, to the days when archaeologists roamed the terrain with the Bible in one hand and a spade in the other. The story of David and Goliath is a complex one. There could have been an ancient memory on conflicts between Judah and Philistine Gath in this region and the story of the slaying of Goliath by a hero named David or Elhanan (2 Sam. 21:19) may be related to this ancient tradition. But the text in 1 Samuel 17 is Deuteronomistic in its language, and it seems to depict Homeric influence.⁷³ It is clear therefore that the story could not have been put in writing before the late 7th century BCE. More than anything else the story portrays the theological goals of the authors and the historical reality of the time of the authors – centuries after the high days of Khirbet Qeiyafa.

A final note on this issue: This eruption of the traditional biblical archaeology, characterized by a highly literal interpretation of the biblical text, should not come as a surprise. It is an unavoidable phase in the now two-centuries-long battle between the advocates of a critical history of ancient Israel and the supporters of a conservative approach that tells a basically biblically narrated history of ancient Israel in modern words. Following every high-tide of critical studies comes a ‘counter-revolution’ of the conservative school.

In fact, this is an old branch in the study of ancient Israel, which I would label ‘wishful thinking archaeology.’ It is spectacularly manifested in the case of Jerusalem. Some scholars reconstruct 10th century Jerusalem as an elaborate city surrounded by heavy fortifications.⁷⁴ Asked once if evidence for such a fortification has ever been found – even a single course of a few stones – the answer was in the negative, but with a comment that 10th century Jerusalem ‘must have been surrounded by such a fortification.’

Back To History

What is the meaning of all this for reconstructing the history of ancient Israel?

Regarding dating, the biblical figure of 40 years for David’s reign and 40 years for Solomon are typological and mean no more than ‘many years’ – the author did not know exactly how many – and the

73 Goliath is even dressed in the armor of a 7th century BCE or later Greek mercenary – Finkelstein (2002).

74 E.g., Cahill (1998); E. Mazar (2007b, Fig. 1).

Saul-David-Solomon sequence is a later literary construct. In reality, the House of Saul and the founder of the Jerusalem dynasty could have been contemporaries. Hence, there is no way to know exactly when in the general framework of the 10th century BCE each of these figures reigned.⁷⁵

Regarding territory, the early monarchs in Jerusalem could have dominated a small territory in the southern highlands – about the size of the territory ruled by Abdi-Heba in the Amarna period. Or, if they manage to take over the early north Israelite, Saulide entity which stretched to their north,⁷⁶ they could have ruled over larger territories in the highlands. But the early Davidides' rule did not extend into the northern valleys (characterized in much of the 10th century BCE by late-Canaanite material culture and late-Canaanite city-states system⁷⁷), or into the lower Shephelah in the west (ruled at that time by powerful Ekron and then Gath). The kingdom of David and Solomon was ruled from a humble settlement in Jerusalem.

Geopolitically, the beautiful Megiddo palaces – until recently the symbol of Solomonic splendor – date to the time of the Omride Dynasty of the Northern Kingdom. This should come as no surprise: Archaeology – especially at Samaria – attests to their extraordinary building ability,⁷⁸ and texts written by contemporary monarchs all attest to the great power of 9th century Israel. The story of the reign of the Omride princess Ataliah in Jerusalem, the reference for the participation of a Judahite king in the conflict of Israel with the Arameans, and archaeology all indicate that the Omrides dominated the marginal, weaker Judah to their south. The great, powerful and glamorous Israelite state was the Northern Kingdom, not the small, isolated and poor territory dominated by 10th century Jerusalem.

Literally, the David and Solomon material in Samuel and Kings should be peeled away stratigraphically, layer by layer, with archaeology and ancient Near Eastern texts providing the evidence. In other words, in this and other cases, archaeology provides vital evidence for incorporating biblical texts into an historical context. In what follows I wish to briefly summarize the stratigraphy of the texts:⁷⁹

Layer A. The first layer is comprised of the description of David's life as an outlaw challenging authority. This account fits the reality of

75 E.g., Handy (1997), 101–102; Ash (1999), 24–25.

76 I believe that there is enough evidence – archaeological, extra-biblical and biblical to argue for the existence of such polity – Finkelstein (2006).

77 Finkelstein (2003).

78 Finkelstein (2000).

79 For details cf. Finkelstein/Silberman (2006a).

an Apiru band active on the fringe of the settled land – a reality that must have disappeared with the growth of Judah in the 9th century BCE. It therefore seems to contain germs of genuine early history. Needless to say, these were not put in writing before the late 8th century BCE and therefore could have absorbed later realities during the long period of oral transmission.

Layer B. Other texts may reflect 9th century BCE realities. I refer to certain details in the description of David's wars,⁸⁰ and to the reference to Geshur and Gath. The latter is described as the most important Philistine city in the Shephelah; it was destroyed in the second half of the 9th century BCE and is not mentioned in late monarchic prophetic works and in 7th century Assyrian sources.⁸¹

Layer C. The first compilation of texts – the early version of the units that had been described long ago as the History of David Rise and the Succession History – may be related to the time shortly after the collapse of the Northern Kingdom. Archaeology has shown an unprecedented population growth in a short period of a few decades, in the late 8th century BCE, in both Jerusalem and the highlands of Judah. This growth can only be explained as the result of a torrent of Israelite refugees who settled in the south.⁸² The compilation of the early texts could have aimed at establishing an early pan-Israelite history – pan-Israelite within Judah – in an attempt to accommodate the two populations and their traditions: northern (negative) and southern (positive) traditions regarding the founders of the Jerusalem dynasty. As I have argued (with Neil Silberman) elsewhere, the main question regarding the famous *apologia* in Samuel⁸³ should be: at what time was it impossible for a Judahite writer to erase the negative northern traditions.

Layer D. The positive description of Solomon as a great monarch must predate the Deuteronomistic negative reference to him in 1 Kings 11. The account of the great Solomon in 1 Kings 3–10 as the cleverest and richest of all monarchs, a great builder and the one who traded with far-off lands, including Arabia, is based on 8th and 7th centuries BCE realities. Some of them can be interpreted as memories of the later days of the Northern Kingdom. I have already mentioned the Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer verse in 1 Kings 9. In addition, I would refer to the stories of Solomon's cities of chariots and horsemen, which probably reflect a memory of the great horse breeding and training facilities of

80 Na'aman (2002).

81 Maeir (2004).

82 Finkelstein/Silberman (2006b); for a different view cf. Na'aman (2007).

83 McCarter (1980); Halpern (2001), 73–103.

the Northern Kingdom at Megiddo,⁸⁴ and to King Hiram of Tyre, who should probably be identified with the only Hiram known from reliable extra-biblical texts – the contemporary of Tiglath-pileser III in the late 8th century BCE. These stories were intended to equate the grandeur of Solomon with that of the great monarchs of the Northern Kingdom. Other materials on Solomon perfectly fit the Assyrian century, specifically the first half of the 7th century BCE. The lavish visit of Solomon's trading partner, the Queen of Sheba, in Jerusalem must reflect the participation of late 8th- and 7th-century Judah, under Assyrian domination, in the lucrative Arabian trade. The same holds true for the description of the trade expeditions to distant lands that set off from Ezion-geber on the Gulf of Aqaba – a site which was not inhabited before late-monarchic times.⁸⁵ These Solomon stories (and the whole stature of Solomon, which reminds one of a great Assyrian monarch) depict a positive approach to the incorporation of Judah into the Assyrian global economy and as such, they seem to echo realities of the days of King Manasseh, in the first half of the 7th centuries BCE.

Layer E. Finally, there are the Deuteronomistic materials of the late 7th century BCE. Among them I would refer to the post-Assyrian pan-Israelite ideas, aimed at the Israelite population outside of Judah, in the northern highlands. No less obvious are materials about the Philistines that depict realities related to the presence of Greek mercenaries in the region in late monarchic times. In this I refer to the mention of *seranim*, the Cherethites and Pelethites, a league of Philistine cities, etc. Above all, I would refer to the dressing of Goliath as a Greek hoplite and to the Homeric nature of the David and Goliath duel.⁸⁶ This was a time when tiny Judah faced mighty Egypt and the victory of David over the giant Goliath – the description of his attire symbolizing the power of Egypt's mercenary forces – could have depicted the hopes of Judah, which faced a dramatic conflict with the 26th Dynasty.

The final late-monarchic text is therefore a product of late 7th century Judah. At a time when the Northern Kingdom was no more than a memory and the mighty Assyrian army had faded away, a new David – the pious Josiah – came to the throne in Jerusalem, intent on 'restoring' the glory of his distant ancestors. He was about to 'recreate' a great and devout United Monarchy, 'regain' the territories of the vanquished Northern Kingdom, and rule from Jerusalem over all Israelite territories and all Israelite people. The description of the glamorous United Monarchy served these goals.

84 Cantrell (2006); Cantrell/Finkelstein (2006).

85 Pratico (1993).

86 Finkelstein (2002).

All this may seem to belittle the stature of the historical David and Solomon. But in the same breath we gain a glimpse into the glamor of the Northern Kingdom – the first true, great Israelite state. If there was a historical United Monarchy, it was that of the Omride dynasty and it was ruled from Samaria. And no less important, we are given a glimpse into the fascinating world of late-monarchic Judah.

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Archaeology and the Biblical Narrative: The Case of the United Monarchy

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Of the various approaches to the historicity of the biblical narratives, the most justified one is in my view the claim that the so-called 'Deuteronomistic History' preserved kernels of ancient texts and realities. This core included components of geo-political and socio-economic *realia*, as well as certain information on historical figures and events, although distorted and laden with later anachronisms, legends and literary forms added during the time of transmission, writing and editing of the texts and inspired by the authors' theological and ideological viewpoint. The authors and redactors must have utilized early source materials, such as temple and palace libraries and archives, monumental inscriptions perhaps centuries old, oral transmissions of ancient poetry and folk stories rooted in a remote historical past, and perhaps even some earlier historiographic writings¹.

This general approach to the biblical text also dictates the evaluation of the historical reality of those narratives relating to David and Solomon. The views are considerably divided: revisionist historians (the so-called 'minimalists') and several archaeologists pointed out the infeasibility of the biblical description of the United Monarchy. Conservatives continue to maintain the biblical narrative as a general framework for historical reconstruction, and those who are 'in the middle of the road' search for possible alternative historical reconstructions.² The

1 Cf. Miller/Hayes (1986); Halpern (1988); Na'aman (1997; 2002); (2007), 399–400; Dever (2001); Liverani (2005); various papers in Williamson (2007).

2 Among the vast literature on this subject published during the last two decades I would mention the collection of essays reflecting a wide variety of views edited by Handy (1997). For conservative approaches defining the United Monarchy as a state "from Dan to Beer Sheba" including "conquered kingdoms" (Ammon, Moab, Edom) and "spheres of influence" in Geshur and Hamath cf. e.g. Ahlström (1993), 455–542; Meyers (1998); Lemaire (1999); Masters (2001); Stager (2003); Rainey (2006), 159–168; Kitchen (1997); Millard (1997; 2008). For a total denial of the historicity of the United Monarchy cf. e.g. Davies (1992), 67–68; others suggested a 'chiefdom' comprising a small region around Jerusalem, cf. Knauf (1997), 81–85; Niemann (1997), 252–299;