

ARMAGEDDON: RAGING BATTLE FOR BIBLE HISTORY

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Two powers dominated the ancient Middle East at the dawn of history 5000 years ago. To the north was the wide crescent plain of the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. That was Mesopotamia, “between the rivers.” There rose Sumer, earliest of the ancient kingdoms, to be followed by Assyria and Babylonia, and the city-states of the Arameans. To the south lay Egypt, a country 1000 miles long and as many feet wide, straddling another great river, the Nile.

These two centers of power knew each other well, traded with each other, and sometimes fought with each other. Here we meet an inexorable fact of geography, as valid today as it was 5000 years ago: in order to get from Egypt to Mesopotamia you have to go right through the Land of Israel. In later years, historians called the road between north and south, between Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Via Maris – the Way of the Sea.

The road left the Nile Delta, followed the Mediterranean coast at the north edge of the Sinai, entered Canaan at Gaza, then headed inland, north along the length of the country. Mount Carmel was a formidable obstacle, however; coming down southeast from where the city of Haifa now stands, the mountain blocks the plain on which the road had gone. You can go around Mount Carmel if you choose to hug the Mediterranean coast, but most traffic sought out one of the mountain passes to get through it. There was a pass on the north, where the biblical city of Yokneam still guards the road. To the south, a road still passes through the valley of Dothan, the place where Joseph was sold by his brothers to a caravan of Ishmaelites and slavery in Egypt.

The main road went neither north or south, but right through the middle, through the narrow pass which the Egyptians called Aruna, and we call Iron (“Ee-ron”). At the exit of the pass into the valley of Jezreel – that is, at the main junction of the main road connecting the main centers of all world civilization – stood the city of Megiddo. Megiddo has always been a place of battles, for whoever controls the town controls the pass, and he who controls the pass con-

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trols the road, and he who controls the road controls the bulk of the commerce of the world! There is enormous potential in living on the main road. One can make a lot of money by erecting a toll booth. It is also very easy to get run over. That, in sum, is the history of the Land of Israel.

The first recorded battle in world history was fought here. The year was 1468 BCE, and the Pharaoh was Thutmose III. The Canaanites had gathered a force of the Pharaoh's enemies, and were waiting for him in Megiddo. Thutmose's generals urged him not to spread his army in a long, thin, vulnerable line through the narrow pass, but to attack from the southern or the northern alternatives. But the King ignored their advice. He led his army straight up the middle, finding – as he had suspected -- that the Canaanites had divided their forces, waiting for him to circle around from the sides, leaving the center wide open. It was a victory for the Egyptians, and Thutmose proudly wrote the story on the walls of the Temple of Amun in Karnak.

This same battle was fought again some 800 years later. Josiah, King of Judah, tried to stop Pharaoh Necho of Egypt, and was killed at Megiddo for his trouble (II Chron. 35:20-25). Josiah's death was a disaster; he was the last great royal descendant of King David, the last good, strong king in the Bible, a pious man beloved by his people and mourned deeply by all of them, including the prophet Jeremiah. Megiddo had by then nearly ceased being a proper city, but became instead a guard position, at most, and – more important for the consciousness of the nation – symbolically the scene of terrible battles. The battle at the beginning of history had happened here. The battle at the end of history would be in the same place. It was described by John the Evangelist in the Book of Revelations: the armies were to be gathered at Mount Megiddo [Hebrew: *Har Megiddo*] -- that is, Armageddon (Rev. 16:14,16).

Two-and-a-half thousand years and some dozens of battles later, Megiddo sits quiet and beautiful at the head of the mountain pass, still the gateway to the north of the country. Armies have not clashed here since the Israelis battled the Arabs at this junction during the Israel War of Independence in 1948. The millennium has arrived, but the final battle of Armageddon has not happened. At least, not yet. Instead, another desperate battle, though largely among friends, with words and books and lectures, not armies and swords, is raging about the

meaning of the place. The battle of Armageddon nowadays concerns the very nature of biblical history and archaeology.

The ruins are here for all to see. Generations of excavators have uncovered the gatehouse, the stables, the water system, and the remains of walls, palaces and temples. For the most part we know what these places were. The question is: When? That is, how to date them. The answer is: Pottery. The working assumption of all archaeology is that every culture and every generation produces its own style of pottery, and by identifying the pottery we can pretty well assign a date. How do we do that? By digging in many places, carefully separating layers and strata, recording the kinds of pottery we find in each stratum. When we find the same kinds of potsherds in a different place, we can assume they date from the same culture and the same time. That is the basic principle of archaeology: dating strata by comparison of pottery. It sounds easy, but it is not easy at all, and it solves only half of the problem.

Strata give us comparisons and relations between layers, not a date. In order to fix dates, there needs to be a permanent, stable benchmark, an absolute date to measure by. Once we have one firm date at one place, we can compare the strata before it and after it. A distinctive large building with a dedication plaque would do; a monumental inscription is even better; a temple dedicated by a king whose dates we know from elsewhere is still better. Best of all is a reference to an earthquake or an eclipse that we can date independently, but this happens rarely. Some kind of benchmark is what we want to find. Alas, with one exception – and that very late – there are no such permanent markers in Iron Age Israel. Or at least none has been found until now.

But there are markers in Egypt and in Mesopotamia, and here we do have dates which are firm and agreed upon, with possible variations of a dozen years or maybe a generation. One such marker is Medinat Habu, funerary temple of Rameses III. We know that Rameses fought a battle against the Sea People in the year 1175 BCE, that he won the battle, and that the Sea People scattered to settle the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Some of these were people the Bible calls Philistines. They had a very different style pottery from the Canaanites whose land they settled, and their own style changed and evolved as their presence went on. The Israelites, who came into the land at about the same time as the Philistines, made yet different pottery from the Philistines, and so on.

The next step for archaeologists was to connect the pottery they found to the text of the Bible they read. They found a water system, palaces, and a six-room gatehouse connected to a casemate wall in Megiddo, and in Hazor, and in Gezer, three cities the Bible identifies as royal chariot cities of King Solomon. The same monumental architecture in three cities must, therefore, be evidence of the glory of Solomon's kingdom.

This was the consensus of archaeologists for most of the 20th Century, a century dominated by William Foxwell Albright, Professor of Archaeology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, teacher of hundreds and father of the school of "biblical archaeology." Later generations have modified his overriding faith in the accuracy of the biblical narrative, but the general consensus remains that the Bible is, in principle, a reliable document whose narratives by and large are supported by archaeology. Hence, the biblical narrative must serve as part of our research into the places we dig. This view was a reaction against an earlier radical school of Bible scholars, mostly German, centered on the figure of Julius Wellhausen, which denied the accuracy of the biblical account altogether!

Now we have left the world of technical archaeology, of strata and pottery dating and excavation techniques. Now we have entered the world of faith. To change the chronology of the gatehouse of Megiddo, to say it is not from the time of Solomon but a generation or two later, to say that there is nothing important on Megiddo that we can date from King Solomon, is to say that the biblical story of the glory of the United Monarchy, the kingdom of David and Solomon, is simply wrong. It is to say that there was no United Monarchy. And to say all this is to undermine the historical accuracy of the Bible. These are serious matters, especially for people who believe in the truth of Holy Scripture. The new excavators at Megiddo have done precisely this.

Israel Finkelstein, Professor of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, is one of the three leaders of the modern excavation of Megiddo. He argues that the great buildings on Megiddo must date from at least a generation, and perhaps close to a century, after Solomon. The layman cannot easily follow the thread of these technical discussions, but their conclusion is clear: The glory of Israel begins not in the 10th Century with David and Solomon, and not from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt, nor even from Dan to Beersheba, but in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, with King Omri and his son the famous King Ahab. There are,

they argue, no significant Iron Age monumental remains on Megiddo that date before the Ninth Century BCE.

Finkelstein does not believe the United Monarchy of David and Solomon, the glorious Golden Age of Ancient Israel, the ideal time to which the writers of the Bible looked back, ever in fact existed. But he is not the most radical critic of biblical archaeology. There is a group of scholars, centered mostly in Copenhagen, who believe that David and Solomon themselves never existed. When one of them, K.W. Whitelam, wrote a book entitled *The Invention of Ancient Israel: the Silencing of Palestinian History*, we left both the technical realm of archaeology and the spiritual realm of faith and creed. We have gone straight into the political situation of the Middle East, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Deny David and Solomon, deny the accuracy of the historical part of the Bible, and you have undermined one of the core claims of modern Israelis to the land promised to, given to, conquered by, settled by, ruled by, made great by their ancestors. Readers of this and other books like it have seen a violent anti-Israel sentiment at work here, and some have described the effort as anti-Semitic, especially as the archaeological evidence for Ninth, Eighth and Seventh Century Israel and Judah remains convincing.

Archaeology, unlike mere treasure hunting, is a rigorous scientific pursuit, based on the most careful excavation techniques and the most severe technical disciplines of pottery and other dating. Here, in the discipline itself, we may find a way to come to a consensus. The consensus, though now somewhat frayed, still holds: It is impossible to make sweeping generalizations on the ancient history of Israel from only one site, even a site as important as Megiddo.

If we are getting bogged down in Megiddo we can turn to another great city of the north that was larger by far and arguably a more important city than Megiddo. Amnon Ben-Tor, Professor of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has been digging for the past decade in the ruins of Hazor – *the city was in those days head of all these kingdoms* (Josh. 11:10).

The stratigraphy of Israel in the Iron Age, the period from before King David to after the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom, was established at Hazor and continues to be accepted as the consensus of archaeologists working in the field. Ben-Tor says that they have identified six complete Israelite strata on the tel of Hazor, the last of which must have ended at another of the absolute

marker dates we know from the ancient Middle East: the conquest of the cities of the north by the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III in 732 BCE. How far, he asks, must you go back from that terminal date to include six full strata? If the average life expectancy of a stratum is 35-40 years, then six strata must take us back anywhere from 210 to 240 years. And that, of course, working backward from the absolute date of 732, brings us right into the 10th Century BCE, the century of Solomon, which is where the consensus said we wanted to be. To do otherwise, says Ben-Tor, and put the earliest possible date for the Northern Kingdom at the House of Omri in the Ninth Century, would require Hazor to have been destroyed and/or re-built every 20-25 years, which is unprecedented and unjustified in the archaeology of Israel or anywhere else.

So the consensus holds; despite innumerable problems with the Bible narrative; with the Patriarchs, the Exodus, Moses and Mount Sinai, Jericho and Bethel and Ai and the Conquest by Joshua, with the difficulties of stratification at Megiddo and the dating of the gatehouse. With all of these problems, the general outline of Israelite history is still accepted as a working hypothesis by almost everyone working in the field. The Minimalist School of Copenhagen has been dismissed out of hand, and with contempt. Everyone agrees that Finkelstein and his colleagues at Megiddo have raised important questions about the biblical narrative on the basis of their work at Megiddo and other places. Everyone agrees that he has suggested interesting solutions. The consensus is, nevertheless, that interesting questions do not justify so radical a reworking of biblical history.

More evidence will certainly shed light on the basic questions of the history of the Bible, and the evidence may indeed come from Megiddo. But if Finkelstein's case is found to be seriously strengthened, then the argument will grow more furious than it is even now. The Battle of Armageddon has not yet come. But it, at least the scholarly version of it, may yet be upon us in the future.