

‘Archaeology and the Bible: The Origins of Israel’

I wish to focus on one story in the Bible which is found in the Books Joshua and Judges. It is the story of the entry of Israel into land of Canaan. I want to investigate the impact that developing sophistication and methods in the field of archaeology have had on the way we read and understand the biblical account of this ‘event’ and whether this particular story still has anything to say to us. While we will only examine one biblical story, it will highlight issues common to many biblical stories. At the same time this particular story has its own unique implications for both modern theological reflection and political ideology.

Brief outline elements of biblical story

For clarity let me outline the story briefly. At the end of Genesis Israel’s ancestors have settled in Egypt. This later turns into captivity. The story of their escape from that captivity under the leadership of Moses, described in the Book of Exodus, is replete with all sorts of plagues and miraculous events. This was followed by 40 years wandering in the wilderness, with their eventual arrival east of Jordan River, whence the story tells us Israel entered the land of Canaan and settled there. This whole story is often referred to as ‘the Exodus’.

Some points to note: The Book of Joshua gives the impression of a great conquest, divided into three distinct campaigns, although we should note that some parts of the land are not mentioned in these campaigns. By mid way through the book the writers of Joshua are bold enough to state (11:23):

²³ So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war.

However, at the beginning of the next book, in Judges 1-2, we find another account which does not picture a unified conquest of the land but a piecemeal struggle for land by individual tribes, some successful, some not.

So in historical terms, even just within the biblical text, we have more than one story of how Israel came to be in the land of Canaan. These stories are conflicting if not contradictory in places and to use them as evidence in modern historical analysis of the history of ancient Israel we at least have to be very selective in how we use one or both.

Older historical studies

By the mid 20th cent. archaeological work in the ancient Near East (ANE) had gained a ‘scientific’ basis. So-called ‘biblical archaeology’, concerned with the relation of archaeological finds at biblical sites to the biblical stories, had gained a foothold in the wider discipline of biblical studies. In terms of the most agreed period for locating an Exodus of early Israelites out of Egypt, i.e. in the late 13th-early 12th centuries

BCE,¹ a number of major archaeological discoveries were made. These included the destruction of a number of cities in the late 13th – early 12th cent. said to have been destroyed by Israel,² a lack of evidence of destruction of a number of cities which were said to have been defeated by Israel in the Bible,³ and some evidence of new settlements in the period at places important in Israelite history.⁴ In terms non-biblical literary material, the most important piece of evidence is the Merneptah stele, an Egyptian inscription set up by Pharaoh Merneptah in the late 13th cent. which mentions ‘Israel’. It does so in a way which indicates some sort of loose group or people (although the question arises re the relation of the ‘Israelites’ in the Merneptah stele to later Israel).

So, while the biblical texts are contradictory in terms of Israel’s entry into the land of Canaan, the early archaeological evidence did help clarify one text over against the other.

By the 1960s 2 major positions had developed regarding the settlement of Israel in the land of Canaan, taking both the biblical story and the archaeological finds to that time into account.

1. The first of these can be represented by the work of US scholar **G.E. Wright**, *Biblical Archaeology* (London: 1962)

“There was an Israelite campaign of great violence and success during the 13th century. Its purpose was to destroy the existing Canaanite city state system, weakening local power to such an extent that new settlement, especially in the hill country, might be impossible.” (p. 70)

“The manifold evidence for the terrific destruction suffered by the cities of Bethel, Lachish, Eglon, Debir (Kiriath sepher), and Hazor during the 13th century certainly suggests that a planned campaign such as that depicted in Josh 10-11 was carried out. ... We may safely conclude that during the 13th century a portion at least of the later nation of Israel gained entrance to Palestine by a carefully planned invasion.” (p. 84)

This pan-Israel, military conquest model was supported by some archaeological evidence regarding city destruction and new settlements, but not by all the evidence.⁵ Some evidence of new pottery styles (e.g. collar-rim jar), new methods of agriculture in the sparse highlands, and a new housing design which were thought to have appeared in the period under consideration also seemed to support it. But we should note that while this position seems supportive of the biblical story in Joshua it does not offer unqualified support.

¹ This dating is based on biblical data relating to the exodus, some ancient documents from Canaanite city-states, and Egyptian history. In terms of archaeological eras, we are talking about the late Bronze (1550-1200BCE) to Iron I (1200-900 BCE) periods.

² E.g. Hazor, Megiddo, Lachish, Eglon etc.

³ E.g. Taanach, Shechem, Gezer and Jerusalem which presents an interesting and complex problem.

⁴ E.g. Dor, Gibeah, Beersheba, Shiloh, Ai.

⁵ Especially in regard to important cities such as Jericho and Ai.

2. The chief proponent of the second major position was **Martin Noth** (*The History of Israel* (2nd ed.; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960).

His model of peaceful infiltration took place in his view over a long period of time and involved the movement into the land of small groups of semi-nomadic pastoralists. These settled in the land between the Canaanite city-states (in the highlands), grew in number and eventually came into conflict with local peoples. This theory takes its impetus partly from the account in Judges 1-2 (with some bits of Joshua) but also draws on sociological theories of the day.

What Noth says regarding the biblical account is interesting (p. 81):

“Later on the Old Testament tradition greatly simplified the process and concentrated it all into a single brief episode, so that as a source of direct information about the temporal duration and sequence of these movements it is quite unreliable; and we neither have nor can expect to have any historical information about these matters outside the Old Testament since, on the whole, the occupation took place more or less unobtrusively, away from the main scenes of the earlier history of Palestine, with no particularly striking events which might be expected to have attracted the attention of the ancient Oriental powers of the time and occasioned some kind of written record.”

3. From the late 60s a third model, the ‘internal revolt model’, emerged. In the 1980s the American scholar **Norman Gottwald** developed this model based on biblical material, apparent early Israelite attitudes to Canaanites, literary artefacts (Amarna letters of the 15th-14th centuries) and, in Gottwald’s case, a good bit of Marxist theory.

He suggested that ‘Israel’ emerged from the Canaanite city state system, consisting of a coalition of groups, most of Canaanite stock, including semi-nomadic mercenary groups. Conflict arose but not (as the biblical material suggests) between a desert people and those of settled origin. Rather it was socio-economic in nature. A small group, who had experienced an escape from Egypt and who were worshippers of the god Yahweh, supplied the religious basis for this rebellion.

N. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: a Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985):

In common with the conquest model, revolt theorists acknowledge an important dimension of armed conflict in Israel’s emergence from the start, and they are inclined to see the exodus Israelites, with their faith in the militant delivering God Yahweh, as the final catalyst that clinched a long-brewing social revolution among depressed and marginated Canaanites. In keeping with the immigration model, revolt theorists urge that the formation of Israel was a coalition of many groups with separate prehistories and cultural backgrounds who contributed to the potpourri of traditions underlying the surface unity both in Genesis-Numbers and in Deuteronomy-Judges. Thus like the immigration view, the revolt hypothesis rejects the notion of Canaanites and Israelites as monolithic ethnic blocs and seeks to trace the subtleties in the shift from Canaanites as city-state underlings to Canaanites as tribal Israelites. Also, while the exodus ingredient in the Israelite movement is generally

granted as the ‘spark’ that provided high morale and coordination, it was Canaanites who provided the ‘tinder’ of human forces in motion for the revolutionary conflagration.” (p. 272)

None of these three models was without its problems.

More recent archaeological finds & interpretation

Since the 1980s considerable archaeological investigation has been undertaken. Recent finds and points of discussion include:

- a ‘population explosion’ in the central highlands with ~300 new sites dating to the late 13th/early 12th centuries and showing a shift from urban to rural settlement, which moved over time from east of the Jordan toward the west.
- there is strong continuity in the pottery and architecture in these settlements from late Bronze age (‘Canaanite’) to Iron I sites with the pottery and architecture suggesting an unstratified socio-economic structure.
- these new, small scale farming settlements lacked protective walls suggesting that the newcomers ‘were mostly not invaders, political refugees, revolutionaries, “social bandits”, or the like, but simply immigrants from elsewhere in Canaan most of them apparently experienced farmers and stockbreeders.’⁶
- cultic finds have suggested that religion at the popular level in ancient Israel from the 12th to the ninth and eighth centuries may well have been an amalgam of ‘biblical’ Yahwism and Canaanite fertility beliefs.
- finally, archaeological evidence indicates that while pig husbandry was practised in earlier Canaanite communities of the Bronze Age and continued in later Canaanite areas during Iron I, there is an absence of pig bones in Iron I settlements in the central highlands. This could be indicative of a connection to later Israel which, of course, did not eat pork.

The interpretation of all this data has produced some interesting agreements and disagreements. However, there is now general agreement that most of the Iron Age population of the highlands was indigenous to the land. That is, that the people who make up later Israel, descend from the former Canaanite population. The older views of a massive, unified conquest, or of a large scale migration into the land from outside, have largely been abandoned. The assertions of the ‘biblical archaeology’ movement prior to the 1980s, regarding the ‘Israelite’ character of particular types of pottery and domestic architecture have now given way to more complex discussion and proposals.

This has raised, again, the question of the relation of the biblical stories to archaeological finds and the interpretation of those finds. Debate is now focused on:

1. details of the emergence and make up of the highland peoples;
2. issues of ethnicity and the relation of the highland peoples to later ‘Israel’ as that can be defined in relation to biblical material.

The controversial questions now turn out to be: *how* and *when* can Israelite ethnicity be distinguished from its indigenous origins? The answers to these questions depend

⁶ W. Dever, *BAR* 58.4 (1995), 208.

partly upon archaeological evidence and partly upon matters of ‘theory’: what exactly is meant by ethnicity, and how does a distinctive ethnic group relate to its cultural antecedents?

Some scholars, such as the American **W. Dever**, advocate that the highland communities of the 12th-early 11th centuries are ‘proto-Israelite’ derived mainly from the sedentary lowland Canaanite populations of the late Bronze Age and that they did have sufficient solidarity to constitute ‘Israelite’ ethnicity (even if at an early stage).⁷ He finds support in the use of the name ‘Israel’ on the Merneptah stele. Others, such as the Israeli **I. Finkelstein**, does not see a close connection between the new settlers of the 12th and 11th centuries and later Israel.⁸ He says: ‘the “real Israel” cannot stand up before the ninth-eighth centuries BCE.’⁹ He would connect it with previous Canaanite pastoral nomads.¹⁰

In this debate questions about the origins of Israel are no longer so much ones of ‘history’ as ones of ‘anthropology’.

Implications of this for reading the biblical text

One crucial question that arises out of this can be crudely put this way. If we are to accept what is becoming the prevailing view that Israel as we know it in later manifestations (say 8th cent. on) has connections with the indigenous population of Canaan, indeed has ‘originated’ in some way from those peoples, whence comes the great story of the exodus and conquest etc.?

A number of proposals have been made in this area. Did the story of the exodus and conquest of the land of Canaan originate with a small group who experienced something like that and who became intricately connected with internal Canaanite social movements? Or could the story have arisen among very early West Semitic groups who rose to power in Egypt and were later expelled as was the case with the Hyksos in the 16th cent. BCE. Such a story could have served as a focus of resistance against Egyptian imperial rule in Late Bronze Age Canaan or later in the 7th cent. when there was confrontation between Judah and Egypt.¹¹ Such a story is ‘neither historical truth nor literary fiction’.

A second question that arises is this (again crudely put): if the archaeological etc. evidence raises serious questions about the historical claims of the biblical stories, is a theological reading of these biblical stories still possible, or, can they tell us anything about God?

Let me make some points by way of background to this question.

a. The challenge is not new. Questions about the value of historical statements in Scripture have always been with biblical interpreters even well before the

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *BAR* 59:4 (1996).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁰ **Brett, 66.**

¹¹ So Finkelstein and Silberman.

development of a ‘scientific’ approach to history in recent centuries. It is just that the anomalies have increased in number and complexity.

b. We are not dealing in the Bible with ‘history’ in the sense we understand it today. The Bible contains many literary genres each with its own language and forms and way of telling truth. The story we have been considering is part of what we might call the ‘founding myth’ of Israel. That founding myth, in turn takes its form from mythic patterns evident in other ‘founding myths’ of the ancient world. The truth of such myths goes well beyond ‘historical reporting’ and is concerned principally with theological truth about God, humankind, law to govern human life, the gift of life in land, and worship to name a few. This is literature that speaks largely in terms of metaphor. A consideration of the theological statements of the Bible is not to be confused with a study of the history of ancient Israel, or its religion. We are dealing in the Bible not with reportage of ‘what happened’ but with interpretive memory, ‘claimed history’ as Walter Brueggemann says. He states further: ‘Thus the literary offer as a vehicle for religious claim does not rise or fall with critical historical reconstruction, for the literature is not a product of “events,” but a product of imaginative interpretation.’¹²

c. The Bible is inextricably bound to a community of faith which recognises it as Scripture (i.e. canon) – here I am talking about a large community over time as well as its smaller manifestations. The interpretation of theological statements within Scripture is always in the context of a constant searching, a constant debate within the community of faith, and a constant reflection on its own past statements, the very things that the biblical text itself exhibits.

The biblical text, as we understand it today, bears witness both to the struggles of many generations in coming to grips with their experience of God in their lives and to the attempt to give that experience articulation. Views are expressed and traditions told, modifications are made, contradictory positions are proposed, composite texts are compiled, prophetic texts are updated, and so on – and all the while, faith is eternally questioning for understanding.¹³

But how then does one read the biblical text theologically. Can it still tell us about God and how does it do that? As a theologian, seeking to understand the (Christian) faith, what can I glean from this story, if anything?

- a. First, I do believe that the Bible has something to say both to the contemporary community of faith and the world at large. But I realise that this is a statement of faith. It is not dependent on the Bible’s value as an historical document. It is built on the long experience of a faith community, and on

¹² W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 10. Dever also notes (*BAR* 58.4 ('95) p. 211) ‘Thus we are dealing here with literature, which does not reflect real life directly or even necessarily accurately – especially ancient literature, which never claims to be historical in the modern sense. Literature reflects life imaginatively. The biblical writers and editors are therefore interpreting events; seeing the past through “the eyes of faith”; looking at monarchical Israel after its history is finished, trying to make sense of it all.’ He goes on to say that their conclusion may seem to us ‘skewed historically’, ‘naïve theologically’, and certainly unable to ‘be confirmed archaeologically’.

¹³ A.F. Campbell and M. O’Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: texts, introductions, annotations*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, xiv.

personal religious experience. Of course, how the Bible stands up under historical investigation such as I have briefly mentioned today, or other forms of ‘scientific’ analysis for that matter, might affect how I approach particular biblical texts and the sort of theological questions I might ask of them but, for me in general, it will not determine the Bible’s theological value for me or the community of faith. I would admit here that this is not the case for everyone. Some questions raised through feminist studies for example have posed questions of whether the Bible still has value for the contemporary community.

- b. Secondly, I take the things I have mentioned especially about ‘canon’ seriously. I do not interpret this text in isolation. One could read the Joshua story of the conquest of Canaan as an imprimatur for some sort of physical or social genocide of those of different views, ethnicity etc., and this has been done, e.g. the crusades or some fundamentalist Jewish groups repossessing the land of Israel. But I do not believe the Bible as a whole endorses such approaches. I read this text in relation to many others, e.g. Jesus’ command to love even the enemy + many other texts which urge compassion, understanding and justice in all relationships. So I read this text alongside others and also alongside Christian (and Jewish) thought down through the centuries.
- c. Thirdly, I do not read every text, especially narratives like this one, as if they are some injunction telling me to go and do likewise. Some biblical texts can be read that way (e.g. some of the Ten Commandments, or some of Jesus’ parables such as the good Samaritan), but in many instances the text invites us into a space where issues of life and death, justice and compassion etc. need to be talked through, examined in detail or debated. So I read this text with an eye to its genre and its subsequent role within the canon. I must freely admit at this point that there are parts of the larger Christian community which would contest this point and want to read biblical texts in a more literalist, historicist way. I don’t think you can or should.
- d. Finally, what might one say about this particular story? What does it say about God? At one level, I would want to look on the story of the entry into the promised land, as Christian and Jewish traditions have done, in terms of the fulfilment of divine promise (which in the biblical text goes back to Genesis). It speaks about hope – for peace, justice, life, i.e. the ‘kingdom of God’ – and the assurance of that hope. If we also take the Judges material into account, we hear something about the struggle that is part of that hope. At another level I would also want to reflect on this story in relation to European settlement in Australia and the abuse and dispossession of the indigenous population, often with some religious imprimatur. A close comparison invites such reflection but I would look at it in negative terms so to speak. It would invite judgment on those who use and abuse such biblical texts in relation to other texts. I would be wanting to ask how the hope inherent in the story relates to those who are victimised on the basis of that same story.

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