Review Essay

ARCHAEOLOGY, ICONOGRAPHY, AND THE RECREATION OF THE PAST IN IRON AGE HOLY LANDS

PAMELA BERGER
Boston College


These are momentous times in the archaeology of Israel/Palestine. After decades of excavation, most archaeologists have concluded that the stories about the patriarchs were more legend than history; the Israelites were never in Egypt; and Joshua did not conquer the land and pass it on to the twelve tribes. Even more startling to the non-specialist, scholars are interpreting the archaeological evidence to suggest that the extensive kingdom of David and Solomon described in the Bible did not exist; that the religion of Judah as well as Israel was not monotheistic; and that Iron Age Judah was not aniconic, but actually had statues of YHWH, and perhaps even of “his Asherah” [female companion]. These conclusions are in part the result of archaeological evidence and iconographic interpretations which now supplement traditional text-orientated approaches to the history of the region.

The new perspectives have provoked internecine battles and have become part of the regional political struggles. In the mid-nineties a critique developed by Keith W. Whitelam in The Invention of Ancient Israel...
charged that the monarchic tradition of David and Solomon outlined in the Bible gave rise, in the modern period, to an interpretation of history that excluded other peoples in the area. This interpretation in turn was used to formulate a version of the past that stressed the uniqueness and superiority of Israel and the inferiority of the indigenous people (read Palestinians). Whitelam contended that Judeo-Christian “biblical” archaeologists, bound by their own cultures and traditions, concentrated only on the history of the Jewish people rather than on a history of the region as a whole. Their emphasis on proving the existence of a remarkable Iron Age monarchy in the tenth century BCE (the time of David and Solomon) denied a space and a time to the histories of others.\footnote{1} The questions raised by these new perspectives pose a challenge to the field and have provoked some angry encounters. Not only have normally staid western scholars turned uncharacteristically vitriolic, but conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis have erupted at archaeological symposia.

In the midst of this rancor, *The Bible Unearthed*, written by the Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein in cooperation with Neil Silberman, appears measured and judicious. Finkelstein is the head of the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology; Neil Silberman is a historian trained at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and contributing editor for *Archaeology Magazine*. Their book presents an overview of the archaeological evidence in Israel/Palestine from the late Bronze Age to the early sixth century. Unlike many earlier archaeologists, Finkelstein does not rely on digging at a particular site in order to “prove” the accuracy of a particular biblical text. His methodology is more inclusive. He and his team undertake surveys of the land, broad surface excavations that aim at revealing as much as it will yield about the various cultures and peoples who inhabited it. And this means all of the peoples, not just the people of Israel. His interpretations rest on an analysis of inscriptions and artifacts from the whole of the Near East, and he incorporates the insights of anthropologists, geographers, and economists – in short, of research in any field that he feels can contribute to a better understanding of the past.

A case in point is his study of the biblical account of the battle of Jericho. The notion of the historicity of the Joshuan conquests had seen some support among scholars until fairly recently. But Finkelstein and his school have confirmed that the destruction implicit in the conquest text never occurred. No evidence exists that Canaanite cities, located on the coastal plain and in the valleys, were destroyed at or near the time of the supposed conquest. Indeed, unlike the description in the Bible, the
Canaanite settlements that did exist then were not large and fortified. Instead of the military conquest recorded in the Bible, archaeology confirms that over the decades, groups of pastoral peoples integrated peacefully among the indigenous inhabitants in the hills of what was part of Canaan. These infiltrating shepherds and goatherds slowly began to undertake agriculture and establish permanent villages in the eastern highlands of Palestine (the land now termed the West Bank, or, by those Israelis who seek their identity in biblical history, Judea and Samaria). There is no way to know the “ethnic identities” of these infiltrating peoples, though Finkelstein (107) chooses to call them Israelite. Thus the idea that heroic conquerors entered the land and won great battles with God’s assistance is false.

Finkelstein’s views are even more controversial when it comes to the monarchy of David and Solomon. In the Bible, this period represents the epitome of the political, economic, and military might of the people of Israel in the ancient world. According to I Kings 4:21-24, the Davidic empire extended from the Euphrates River to Gaza. But as Finkelstein notes, excavations have revealed only three inscriptions in all the Middle East alluding even vaguely to Israel or the House of David (173). In one of them, dated 1208 BCE, the name Israel is mentioned in a document that reads, “Israel is desolated, its seed is not [i.e., its seed is destroyed].” Finkelstein concludes that David and Solomon were nothing but “mountain chieftains,” and that Judah had only poor tiny villages at the time (142). Thus the notion of a heroic ancient king with a vast kingdom is a theological construct formulated by those who set the story down many centuries after the supposed events occurred.

Finkelstein has a hypothesis as to just when and where this redaction of the text was done. He thinks that the many epics, poems, and ballads of the Bible were shaped more or less into their present form during the last years of the seventh century BCE, under the reign of Josiah, King of Judah. The priests and scribes who influenced the narrative of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings, have been labeled the Deuteronomists. Not only did they strive to promote the legitimacy of the line of David, the remote ancestor of King Josiah, they also reworked the biblical text to express the perspective of a new religious movement, a movement which called for the veneration of YHWH alone and for the prohibition against making an image of the divine. The multiplicity of cults which had been flourishing for centuries and which were still widely practiced in the late seventh century were a threat to the powers of these biblical redactionists and were condemned throughout their writings. A typical Deuteronomistic passage rails against
King Rehoboam and the general population because they “built for themselves high places, and pillars, and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree…” (I Kings 14:22-24). The Deuteronomists labeled this diversity of worship a Canaanite heresy.

* 

Archaeological evidence confirms why the Deuteronomists inveighed so vehemently against the worship of cultic statuary, and the reason is that it was widespread. Right up until the late seventh century (i.e., during Iron Age I and II, the period of Judges and Kings) El, Baal, Asherah, Astarte, and a deity called the Queen of Heaven were all fashioned into figures and, along with YHWH, venerated in that form. An analysis of the iconography of these cultic objects can be found in several articles in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* edited by Karel van der Toorn. Van der Toorn and the scholars published in this collection emphasize the importance of iconographic data for an understanding of the Bible. Objects from the material culture are an independent source, for such objects have not been “reworked” over the centuries as has the text of Scripture. Furthermore, scientific analysis of the stratigraphy enables us to determine the period of the object. An interpretation of the image is thus as important as an interpretation of the word, and the image can have a totally independent message, a message which, in some cases, may take precedence. Thus an analysis of iconography should supplement our study of the biblical text when we are seeking to understand religious practice. Furthermore, when scholars confine themselves to a study of text alone, they are valorizing religions which have a canonical body of writings, but neglecting religions that do not.

Using inscriptive and iconographical evidence, the scholars published in *The Image and the Book* demonstrate that anthropomorphic cult statuary was extensive in Iron Age Israel/Palestine. One of the most pertinent essays is by Christoph Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh’s Cult Images.” Uehlinger analyzes and publishes sixty-one examples of cultic statues including goddesses (some with a child); nude women (sometimes with tambourines); *naos*-like shrine plaques showing one of two nude females; fragments of bearded male heads; and lions, serpents, and doves. The stratigraphy of the sites studied indicates that right up until the late eighth century cult statuary remained in general use in Judah as well as in the northern kingdom of Israel. He even puts forward the hypothe-
sis that two enthroned figures of Judahite provenance and dated in the late eighth or early seventh century may represent “Yahweh and his Asherah” (150, fig. 61).3 Herbert Neihr’s essay goes even further and examines the evidence for the existence of a cult statue of YHWH in the Holy of Holies of the First Temple. He concludes that there was such a statue of YHWH in the temple right up until the destruction of 586 BCE (84-5). He suggests that a cult statue was created for the Second Temple as well, and existed therein right until the Hasmonean period (95).

Many biblical passages decry the idolatry of the Northern Kingdom, but scholars have noted that such denunciation could be the result of the Deuteronomists’ hostility toward Samaria. Bob Becking’s article in van der Toorn’s volume, “Assyrian Evidence for Iconic Polytheism in Ancient Israel?” cites an extra-biblical text relating to northern idolatry. The text, known as the Nimrod Prism, relates the exploits of King Sargon II (722-703 BCE). Becking examines a passage which tells the story of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom. One of the lines in the passage refers to the booty of war removed from the city, which included the phrase “gods in whom they trusted” (160-161). Becking points to these words as referring to the images of gods worshipped by those in the royal cult of the Northern Kingdom of the Israelites. He concludes that the Deuteronomists were inveighing against actual religious practices among the Iron Age Israelites of the North for they must have been both polytheistic and iconic.

Thus the pre-exilic Judahites and Israelites were no more monotheistic or aniconic than other peoples of that time such as the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Philistines, Phoenicians or Canaanites. The archaeological finds demonstrate that the practice of religion was varied, decentralized, and, except during the short reign of Josiah (639-609 BCE), not at all restricted to the veneration of YHWH in the Temple of Jerusalem. Those putting together the epics, poetry, and ballads that make up the Bible had a certain agenda: to advance the cause of Yawhistic orthodoxy of religion and a centralized kingdom in Jerusalem under a monarch of the Davidic line. This Jerusalem-centered monotheism was read back into biblical history as the way things should always have been.

* 

The legacy of that monotheism is addressed in The Curse of Cain by Regina M. Schwartz. Schwartz is a professor of English at Northwestern University and Director of the Chicago Institute of Religion, Ethics,
and Violence. On the one hand, Schwartz recognizes a strand in the monotheism of the Bible holding out the promise of universalism and with it, an endorsement of ethics and peace. She sees another strand, however, one that leads to murderous intolerance, where those who do not worship YHWH are reduced to abominations by those who see their truth as The Truth and their ethics as The Ethics.

Schwartz casts her critique of monotheism in terms of the principle of scarcity – scarcity of land, of prosperity, of power, and of divine favor. The notion of scarcity is introduced by the story of Cain and Abel, and is found again with Jacob and Esau. When God can accept only one offering over the other, when there is only one blessing, the terrible cost is that the Other becomes an Outcast. “Esau pleaded with his father, ‘Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!’” (Genesis 27:38). And the Outcast develops murderous intentions towards his brother: “As soon as the time to mourn my father is at hand, I will kill my brother Jacob” (Genesis 27:41). Schwartz sees these as eponymous ancestors of peoples whose hostility is nurtured for centuries, peoples who see the Other as cursed and murderous.

Her examination of one part of the story of Moses lays bare another aspect of the violence inherent in monotheism (the notion of one people under one God) against the Other. That god gives permission for bloody destruction of the Them as opposed to the Us. When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai, he proclaims that the people must worship one deity. Finding that they are worshipping another, he calls upon the Levites who have rallied to him and declares: “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Gird on your sword, every man of you, and quarter the camp from gate to gate killing one his brother, another his friend, another his neighbor.’ The sons of Levi carried out the command of Moses and about three thousand people perished that day” (Exodus 32:26-28).

Schwartz looks at the biblical narrative of the slavery in Egypt and sees it serving as a justification for the conquest of Canaan. Israel was a victim in Egypt, and the way the narrative is fashioned, that persecuted past gave it the moral right to conquer. Israel is a victim, thus she can become an aggressor. God tells the Israelites that against the “Amorites, Perizzites, the Canaanites... I sent out hornets in front of you, which drove the two Amorite kings before you; this was not the work of your sword or your bow. I gave you a land where you never toiled, you live in towns you never built; you eat now from vineyards and olive groves you never planted” (Joshua 24:11-13).
The invocation of a persecuted past to legitimate conquest has been used by numerous nations that have seized land while rehearsing the myth of escaping from persecution. (Schwartz alludes to such diverse examples as the Nazis reciting their injuries in World War I, and Europeans fleeing persecution abroad while seizing land from Native Americans.) Though we now know that the Joshua conquest story is only a fantasy, that narrative has provided religious justification for political actions that have resulted in displacement and destruction of other peoples, of laying claim to a land that had belonged to others, and of conducting a “conquest under the banner of divine will” (57). Schwartz decries the fact that the biblical narrative shows no ethical accountability: “and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them” (Deuteronomy 7:2).

Millions of people imagine that the Bible relates to and serves as a commentary on their immediate lives. That is positive when the texts inveigh strongly against social abuses, or when the prophets rail against those who oppress and bid for charity toward the widow, the orphan, and the poor. But when the biblical narrative deals with the Chosen People, the Us as opposed to Them, the ethical imperatives it espouses give way; it becomes the account of one people who inherit at the expense of another people.

*

Why do the new archaeological discoveries and their interpretations matter at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Since the nineteenth century, “biblical” archaeology has been dominant in the region, and “biblical” archaeologists have tried to prove that the sites mentioned in the Old Testament bear witness to the historicity of the biblical account. That position is breaking down. A wider, more inclusive archaeology is taking its place, and with it, a more inclusive interpretation of the scriptural narrative. We now ask ourselves in what way the notion of the single Israelite Nation, defended and guided by divine will, has supported a problematic ethic that engenders both unwarranted violence and a vision that sets human beings against one another.

Christian, Jews, and Muslims all see the Old Testament stories as part of their religious-cultural heritage, and they have used the stories as inspiration for an illustrious literary and artistic tradition. A large element of that tradition has been a rewriting and a reconfiguring of the stories. Schwartz calls for another kind of rewriting, a re-visioning of the Bible.
to subvert the dominant vision of violence and scarcity, and to replace it with an ideal of plenitude, generosity, and inclusiveness.

Perhaps one day the new archaeological insights garnered from the soil of the Middle East, combined with the new readings of the biblical narrative, will help support such an alternative vision, one inspired by a past when the peoples of the region planted side by side, watched their flocks and bred their cattle side by side, traded with one another and formed alliances together to fight hostile powers. They mixed their blood through intermarriage, and for the most part, venerated some form of god and the “hosts of heaven.” They worshipped at a variety of places, often on ground that was considered sacred to all. The books reviewed in this essay allow for such a vision, one where the peoples of the region develop a pride in a past shared by their distant ancestors. May the new interpretation of that past help spin out a new kind of future. If not, violence will continue to erupt among these so-called different ethnic groups, and they will continue to stake out their claims to prior ownership of the land in blood.

NOTES

1 For one response to the Whitelam perspective see Dever.

2 Uehlinger is the author of the ground-breaking book, Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole, now translated into English as Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel. The essay in the book under review supersedes this earlier publication, for now he concludes that the veneration of anthropomorphic cult statuary in Iron Age Palestine was continuous, a correction of his prior hypothesis, which postulated a hiatus between the ninth and eighth centuries.

3 A summation of the biblical references to cultic statues is in the Uehlinger article (van der Toorn 146-149).

WORKS CITED

