

Facts Underground

The field of biblical archaeology has been rocked, so to speak, by dramatic new finds in the heart of ancient Jerusalem. For the last few years, a number of respected archaeologists have posited that the biblical accounts of Jerusalem as the seat of a powerful, unified monarchy under the rule of David and Solomon are essentially false. The most prominent of these is Israel Finkelstein, the chairman of Tel Aviv University's archaeology department, whose 2001 book *The Bible Unearthed*, written together with Neal Asher Silberman, became an international best seller. The linchpin of his argument was the absence of clear evidence from the archaeological excavations carried out in Jerusalem over the last century. "Not only was any sign of monumental architecture missing," he wrote, "but so were even simple pottery shards." If David and Solomon existed at all, he concluded, they were no more than "hill-country chieftains," and Jerusalem, as he told the *New York Times*, was "no more than a poor village at the time."

But now comes word of a most unusual find: The remains of a massive structure, in the heart of biblical Jerusalem, dating to the time of King David. Eilat Mazar, the archaeologist leading the expedition, suggests that it may be none other than the palace built by David and used by the Judean kings for over four centuries. If she is right, this would mean a reconsideration of the archaeological record with regard to the early First-Temple period. It would also deal a death-blow to the revisionist camp, whose entire theory is predicated on the absence of evidence in Jerusalem from this period. But is she right?

According to the book of Samuel, when David conquered the Jebusite city of Jerusalem around the year 1000 B.C.E., he did not destroy it, but instead left it standing, including its great citadel to defend the city along its northern approach. In this city, today known as the City of David, a neighborhood just to the south of Jerusalem's Old City, he added a few things as well—most notably a palace, built by master craftsmen sent by the Phoenician king Hiram of Tyre, who had concluded an alliance with David against their mutual enemy, the Philistines. According to archaeological evidence, Jerusalem was already an ancient city, founded some two thousand years *before* David arrived, and fortified with walls as much as one thousand years before. Because of its unique topography—a high hill nestled between two deep valleys that converge at its southern point, graced with abundant water from the Gihon spring, and exposed to attack only along a ridge from the north—the location was ideal for the capital of David's kingdom.

Based on this evidence, coupled with textual clues as to the topography—as described in the book of II Samuel (5:17), when the Philistines mustered in Emek Refaim, David “descended to the citadel,” implying that the palace was higher up on the mountain than the citadel itself—Mazar formulated her proposal as to the location of the palace in a 1997 article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*. “If some regard as too speculative the hypothesis I shall put forth in this article,” she wrote, “my reply is simply this: Let us put it to the test in the way archaeologists always try to test their theories—by excavation.”

Few living archaeologists were better suited for this mission, as Mazar has extensive experience both in excavations at the City of David and at the Phoenician town of Achziv along the coast north of Haifa. Indicators for the palace would include monumental structures dating to the late-eleventh or early-tenth centuries B.C.E.; distinctive Phoenician-style building, which would have been out of place in the Judean mountains; and a new building created just to the north of the borders of the older Jebusite city—resting

on new land, rather than on destruction layers. Of course, any additional archaeological markers, such as inscriptions, pottery shards, or interior architecture, would further confirm such a find. In early 2005, after securing the necessary permits and the support of the Jerusalem-based Shalem Center (which also publishes *AZURE*), the Hebrew University, and the City of David Foundation, Mazar began digging.

The evidence is remarkable. It includes a section of massive wall running about 100 feet from west to east along the length of the excavation, and ending with a right-angle corner that turns south and implies a very large building. Within the dirt fill between the stones of the great wall were found pottery shards dating to the eleventh century B.C.E.; this is the earliest possible date for the walls' construction. Two additional walls, also large, running perpendicular to the first, contain pottery dating to the tenth century B.C.E.—meaning that further additions were made after the time of David and Solomon or during their reign, suggesting that the building continued to be used and improved over a period of centuries. The structure is built directly on bedrock along the city's northern edge, with no archaeological layers beneath it—a sign that this structure, built two millennia after the city's founding, constituted a new, northward expansion of the city's northern limit. And it is located at what was then the very summit of the mountain—a reasonable place indeed for the palace from which David “descended.”

This immediate evidence fits well with other archaeological finds from the site, as well. In 1963, the renowned archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon reported finding a Phoenician “proto-Aeolic capital,” or decorative stone column head dating to the same period, at the bottom of the cliff atop which the new excavation has taken place. Kenyon wrote that this capital, along with other cut stones she found there, were “typical of the best period of Israelite building, during which the use of Phoenician craftsmen was responsible for an exotic flowering of Palestinian architecture. It would seem, therefore, that

during the period of monarchic Jerusalem, a building of some considerable pretensions stood on top of the scarp.” In the early 1980s, Hebrew University’s Yigael Shiloh uncovered the enormous “stepped-stone” support structure which now appears to be part of the same complex of buildings. And in the new excavation, Mazar has discovered a remarkable clay *bullae*, or signet impression, bearing the name of Yehuchal Ben Shelemiah, a noble of Judea from the time of King Zedekiah who is mentioned by name in Jeremiah 37:3—evidence suggesting that four centuries after David, the site was still an important seat of Judean royalty. This matches the biblical account according to which the palace was in more or less continuous use from its construction until the destruction of Judea by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.

So, is it David’s palace? It is extremely difficult to say with certainty; indeed, no plaque has been found that says on it, “David’s Palace”; nor is it likely that such definitive evidence will ever be found. And yet, the evidence seems to fit surprisingly well with the claim, and there are no finds that suggest the contrary, such as the idolatrous statuettes or ritual crematoria found in contemporary Phoenician settlements. The location, size, style, and dating are all right, and it appears in a part of the ancient world where such constructions were extremely rare and represented the greatest sort of public works. Could it be something else? Of course. Has a better explanation been offered to match the data—data which includes not only archaeological finds, but the text itself? No.

There will be no shortage of well-meaning skeptics, including serious archaeologists, who, having been trained in a scholarly world weary of exuberant romantics and religious enthusiasts prone to making sensational, irresponsible claims about having found Noah’s Ark, will be extremely reluctant to identify any new archaeological find with particulars found in the Bible. Others, driven by a concatenation of interests, ideologies, or political agendas, will seize on any shred of uncertainty in the building’s

identification to distract attention from the momentousness of the find. Both groups will invoke professionalism and objectivity to pooh-pooh the proposition that this is David's palace. They will raise the bar of what kind of proofs are required to say what it was to a standard that no archaeological find could ever meet. Or they will simply dismiss it all as wishful thinking in the service of religious or Zionist motives.

There are two good reasons not to be swayed by such claims. The first is that even if this is not in fact David's palace, there is no doubt that we are still talking about an archaeological find of enormous moment. Whether it is a citadel, someone else's palace, or a temple, it is the first-ever discovery of a major construction from the early Israelite period in Jerusalem to date. This alone is enough to overturn the hypothesis of Finkelstein and others that Jerusalem at the time of David was a "poor village" incapable of being the capital of an Israelite kingdom. No longer is it reasonable to claim, as did Tel Aviv University's Ze'ev Herzog writing in *Ha'aretz* in 1999, basing his claim entirely on the absence of just this kind of evidence, that "the great unified monarchy was an imaginary historiosophic creation, invented at the end of the Judean period, at the very earliest." On the contrary: Now we have a major Israelite compound dating to the time of the unified monarchy, firmly establishing Jerusalem as a major city of its time.

For this reason, important voices in the archaeological world have already begun declaring the find to be of great importance, even as they reserve judgment as to its identification as David's palace. "Due to all the possible historical implications, we need to look carefully at the pottery and to further excavate the area," Seymour Gitin, the director of archaeology of the W.F. Albright Institute in Jerusalem, told the *Jerusalem Post*. Yet he adds, "this is an extremely impressive find, and the first of its kind which can be associated with the tenth century [B.C.E.]" The normally reserved Amihai Mazar of Hebrew University, one of the most esteemed scholars in the field of biblical archaeology and author of the standard textbook *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000-586 B.C.E.*, has described the discovery as "something of a miracle."

Yet beyond this, there also are good reasons to identify this building, at least provisionally, as the very palace described in the book of Samuel. This is methodologically sound, so long as we are willing to admit that future evidence could emerge, or a better theory be proposed, that might prompt a different conclusion. Right now we have before us two things: We have a biblical text describing in detail the creation of a Phoenician-style palace by David high up on a particular mountain, around the end of the eleventh or the beginning of the tenth century B.C.E. And we have a grand structure of the Phoenician style dating from the same time, on the summit of that very mountain, located with assistance from the text and previous archaeological discoveries. This was not stumbled upon, moreover, but carefully hypothesized, and the current dig was proposed as the test. The likelihood of this happening by chance is extremely small.

Is this absolute proof? No. But it is enough to shift the burden of proof. “You can never be sure about this sort of thing,” Mazar says. “But it seems that the theory that suggests this to be the very palace described in the book of Samuel as having been built by David is thus far the best explanation for the data. Anyone who wants to say otherwise ought to come up with a better theory.” This is neither wishful thinking nor an imagined past, but good science.

David Hazony

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The editors of *AZURE* would like to extend our deepest condolences to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the families of the bereaved, and the communities that have been devastated. The Jewish people is no stranger to catastrophe, and our hearts go out to those individuals and organizations that have taken upon themselves the incalculable task of offering relief and aiding the recovery. Our prayers for the strength of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region, today and in the future.