

DID THE EXODUS NEVER



KEVIN D. MILLER

“The actual evidence concerning the Exodus resembles the evidence for the unicorn,” writes Baruch Halpern of Pennsylvania State University.

“The Book of Joshua is of no historical value as far as the process of settlement is concerned,” contends Volkmar Fritz, director of the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology in Jerusalem.

“The period of the patriarchs, exodus, conquest, or judges as devised by the writers of Scriptures . . . never existed,” declares Robert Coote of San Francisco Theological Seminary.

The Genesis and Exodus accounts are “a fiction written around the middle of

the first millennium,” states Niels Peter Lemche at the University of Copenhagen, and, “The David of the Bible, David the king, is not a historical figure.”

Welcome to the intellectual world of the biblical minimalists, a new breed of radical scholars who would turn Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and even King David into legends and myths by the stroke of their pens. As far-out as their pronouncements may sound, their work is filtering its way into our world through seminary textbooks and media soundbites. The effect is a wholesale rejection of the Bible’s accounts of Israel’s origins—a matter of no small concern to believing Jews and Christians.

Answering these skeptics, however, is not always so easy as one might expect.

The fact is that not one shred of direct archaeological evidence has been found for Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob or the 400-plus years the children of Israel sojourned in Egypt. The same is true for their miraculous exodus from slavery. And remember those reassuring Sunday-school stories about archaeologists finding Jericho’s walls lying outward just as the Book of Joshua suggests they fell? It turns out that the most respected archaeologist to dig at Jericho earlier this century, Kathleen Kenyon, differed.

But before anyone scribbles “Fiction” over the title page of the Old Testament, some scholars want to tell another side to the story, one that Kenneth Kitchen, James Hoffmeier, and a handful of others are meticulously piecing together.

HAPPEN?

How two Egyptologists are countering scholars who want to turn the Old Testament into myth.



ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE

Through top university presses and in academic conferences, they are exposing a fundamental problem with the conclusions of the biblical minimalists: the skeptical, narrow lenses through which they read the Bible serve them a bit too conveniently—allowing them not only to dismiss uncritically the historical value of the Bible’s texts but also to avoid certain bothersome details that get in the way of their own accounts of the origin of Israel.

Back to the future

In one respect, the current skepticism is nothing new. As early as the eighteenth century, some scholars using the then-new methods of higher criticism had dismissed the early biblical accounts as legends. By the end of the nineteenth century, Julius

Wellhausen had unified decades of theorizing about the authorship of the Pentateuch into his now-famous (slightly modified) Jahwist-Elohite-Priestly-Deuteronomist grid. Known as the Documentary Hypothesis, this theory claimed to detect four different authors or documents behind the “Books of Moses.” By distinguishing these various sources, one could understand the development and progress of Jewish religion from its primitive nomadic origins through the era of the Prophets onward to a religion of the Law. Thus, instead of believing the Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai in the second millennium B.C., Wellhausen thought it was composed after the Jews

Well-worn path: Semites from Canaan were traveling to Egypt long before Jacob did, as seen in this 1890 B.C. scene.

had returned from their exile in Babylon only 450 years before Jesus.

Though discounting the stories of early Israel is not new, the rise of the current skepticism is surprising because of what came between the Wellhausens of the past century and the Lemches of the present decade: the moderating influ-

ence of William Foxwell Albright, the “dean of biblical archaeology.”

When Albright was born in 1891, Wellhausen’s theory had already become the reigning orthodoxy in Old Testament studies. Later, as an established professor of Semitic languages at Johns Hopkins University, Albright recalled that as a

young student he had absorbed the assumptions of higher critics like Wellhausen and had held to an “initially rather skeptical attitude toward the accuracy of Israelite historical tradition.” However, while taking part in archaeological digs in Palestine as a graduate student, his skepticism “suffered repeated jolts as discovery after discovery confirmed the historicity of details which might reasonably have been considered legendary.”

Albright came to suspect scholars like Wellhausen who built grand theories on textual speculation. He saw little use in surmising, for example, whether the children of Israel had conquered Canaan. To *know*, one needed to dig and see if there existed the layers of destruction that would correspond to an Israelite conquest. Empirical facts, not abstract theory, held the answers.

Perfecting modern excavation techniques, Albright and others discovered cities in Judah whose destruction layers seemed to support the biblical accounts of the Babylonian exile. Pottery inscriptions revealed the existence of a Sea People called the Philistines. And thirteenth-century devastation layers at a site believed to be biblical Bethel were interpreted by Albright's student G. Ernest Wright to be the work of Joshua's army.

Eventually, even many liberal scholars began to accept the general outline of biblical history proposed by the “Albright-Wright synthesis.” So influential in the middle years of this century was their biblical archaeology, as it came to be called, that as recently as 1981 Old Testament scholar John Bright could state, “There can really be little doubt that ancestors of Israel had been slaves in Egypt and had escaped in some marvelous way. Almost no one today would question it.”

“We've given up the patriarchs”

Open up the popular magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* today and you will find almost everyone questioning the Exodus account and a lot of the other biblical stories as well. In the July-August 1997 issue, a curious exchange takes place between Niels Peter Lemche and Thomas Thompson, on the biblical minimalist side, and two challengers to the minimal-

Understatement:

Joshua 11:11 says Joshua burned “Hazor with fire.” Archaeologists digging at Hazor (right) found the fire was so hot it turned mud bricks to glass.



ist position, William Dever and P. Kyle McCarter. What is revealing in the dialogue are the defensive tactics taken by one of the *moderates*, Dever, a professor at the University of Arizona and a leading authority on Syro-Palestinian archaeology (he long ago rejected the term “biblical archaeology”).

“I agree with you that [the Book of] Joshua has little to do with any historical events,” he says at one point. “If you guys think I—or the Israeli archaeologists—am looking for the Israelite conquest archaeologically, you're wrong. We've given that up. We've given up the patriarchs.” After Dever has defended the likelihood of a united monarchy under David and Solomon (which is part of what makes him a moderate) and is attacked by Thompson for his motives in searching for and finding a gate at Gezer thought to have been built by Solomon, Dever retorts: “Tom, I don't care in the least whether Solomon ever existed. I'm probably more of a disbeliever than you. I don't really care about the tradition. I don't believe any of the myths.” Finally, after having endured Thompson's innuendoes and attacks throughout the debate, Dever exclaims in sheer exasperation: “I do resent being called a fundamentalist.”

What is it that turns a William Dever into a “fundamentalist” for seeing an association between a gate and the biblical account of Solomon? The answer, says James Hoffmeier of Wheaton College in Illinois, is summed up in one phrase: the hermeneutics of suspicion. If Albright had been able to convince a generation of

scholars that the Bible's account of Israel's origin could be matched in general terms to the evidence from the digs, it was because the Bible was still considered “innocent until found guilty.” The undoing of the Albright antidote to Wellhausen skepticism came when people like Lemche and Thompson began insisting that the Bible stories should be viewed as fables until indisputable evidence proved them to be historical. The accounts were now seen as fictional until proven factual, guilty until proven innocent.

This virulent neoskepticism has proven exceptionally resistant to anything smacking of a “fundamentalist” interpretation, and its proponents have set about revising what they believe was the Albright school's overeager attempts to identify discoveries as biblical events when other events in Near Eastern history could account for them just as well or better. For the minimalists, the paradigm shift has left the Bible largely irrelevant and the fight over the Bible's historical value passé.

Answering the minimalists

But the battle for Jericho, the Exodus, and the other stories of Israel's origins isn't over yet, say Hoffmeier, who has just published a monograph titled *Israel in Egypt* with Oxford University Press, and Kenneth Kitchen, a veteran ancient-languages expert at the University of Liverpool in England. It is just the beginning of round three.

In countering the revisionist history, these two bring something to the fight that Lemche and Thompson and most of

the radical minimalists (with the exception of D. B. Redford) don't have: the credentials of being Egyptologists in addition to backgrounds in biblical studies and Syro-Palestinian archaeology. Using their unusual expertise, they are pointing to discoveries that, vis-à-vis the minimalist pronouncements, show the historical plausibility of the following Bible stories:

Father Abraham. The Bible says God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans (modern Iraq) and led him to the land of Canaan (modern Israel). From his descendants arose the 12 tribes of Israel. These Semitic-speaking, Asiatic people migrated to Egypt, returning only 400 years later to settle Canaan, the land promised to their forefather.

Not so, say the minimalists. One suggests the story is a myth written in the sixth century B.C. to console the Jews being held in Babylon with the knowledge that they are really "back home," since "Abraham" had originated from there. And just as God had led their forefather to Canaan, they too would one day return to the land promised his seed. Seen this way, the story reflects the circumstances of the middle of the first millennium B.C., not the first half of the second millennium B.C.

If so, asks Kitchen, how does one explain the following odd coincidences:

- Abraham—if he existed—would have lived sometime between 1800 and 1600 B.C. (using the late Exodus dating based on the death of Pharaoh Rameses II in 1213 B.C. and Exodus 1:11, which says that the children of Israel built the city of Rameses). Why, then, does the Genesis 14 account of Abraham defeating a coalition of kings from the east fit so well the geopolitical conditions of that—and only that—era?

Before that time, the region of Mesopotamia was closely governed by the dynasties of Ur, and after that time, the

empires of Babylon and Assyria controlled the region. Only during the first half of the second millennium could kings of small city-states have roamed the countryside, as did the potentates Abraham encountered, looking to expand their domains.

- Abraham, and later Isaac, made a treaty with King Abimelech, and Jacob made a treaty with Laban. "I have over 90 documents [of ancient treaties and covenants] to compare from 2600 B.C. down to 600 B.C.," Kitchen told CT, "and so there's no room for mistake here." The treaties, he explains, take distinctive forms over the centuries, with oaths and curses and stipulations being presented in different orders and being given different emphases. The ones with Abimelech and Laban fit precisely the structure of treaties from the middle of the second millennium—but neither later nor earlier ones.

- The names Yitzchak (Isaac), Ya'akov (Jacob), Yoseph (Joseph), and Yishmael (Ishmael) all begin with something linguists call the "Amorite imperfective." From studying lists of thousands of names found from the third millennium and later, Kitchen shows that 55 percent of the names during the time of the Patriarchs begin with an *i/y* sound, but already "by 1500 the whole thing drops to a tiny percentage and never ceases dropping after that." Where, Kitchen asks, did the fiction writers of the middle first millennium B.C. get these names if they were composing their biblical novellas a thousand or more years after the names had fallen from popular use?

- Kitchen asks the same question about Genesis 37:28, which states that Joseph was sold by his brothers to slave traders on their way to Egypt for 20 silver shekels. Tracking the price of slaves sold from 2400 B.C. to 400 B.C. using extrabiblical sources, he finds that this amount matches exactly the going price in the eighteenth century. Steady inflation had driven it up to 30 shekels by the

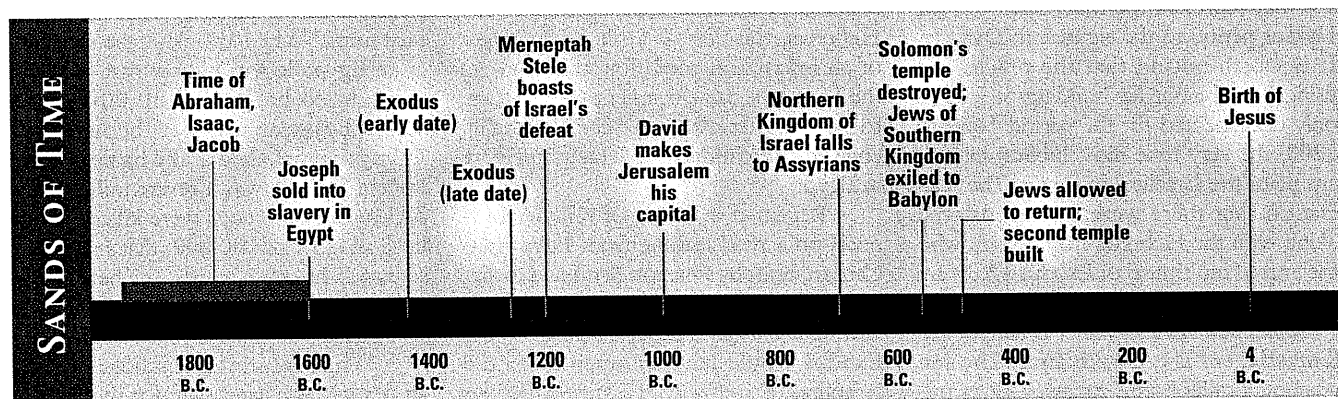
thirteenth century (which corresponds to Exod. 21:32), 50 shekels in the eighth century (which corresponds to 2 Kings 15:20), and to nearly 100 shekels soon after the Exile in the sixth century.

Joseph in Egypt. Is it realistic to think that a Semitic-speaking foreigner like Joseph, and later Moses, could have risen to the highest levels of Egyptian government? Hoffmeier answers by pointing to an Egyptian tomb discovered in Sakkara, Egypt, in the late 1980s. It contains the coffin of a Semite named Aper-el along with the coffins of his wife and children. His titles include "vizier," "mayor of the city," "judge," "father of god," "child of the nursery."

Hoffmeier points out that Aper-el's name was the first of a high-ranking, Semite official to be found there, even though Sakkara has been excavated and explored for more than a century. "If such a high-ranking official as Vizier Aper-el was completely unknown to modern scholarship until the late 1980s, despite the fact that he lived in one of the better documented periods of Egyptian history [fourteenth century], and was buried in arguably the most excavated site in Egypt, it is wrong to demand, as some have, that direct archaeological evidence for Joseph should be available if he were in fact a historical figure." This is even more the case, he says, because Joseph lived during a period when surviving Egyptian documents of any kind are sparse and because Joseph operated in the Nile Delta, an area that remains "underexcavated" to this day.

Joseph's high ranking becomes even more plausible when considering the regular migrations and imperial transactions that occurred between Canaan and Egypt, as seen in the following discoveries:

- The Wisdom of Merikare and the Prophecy of Neferti, ancient Egyptian documents, report influxes of thousands of Semites into the Nile Delta between 2200 and 2000 B.C. Similar patterns of



settlement recurred over the next thousand years, creating a “significant Asiatic population” in the Delta region, says Hoffmeier. The Merikare document explains that these Asiatic, Semitic-speaking peoples, like Jacob and his sons, had come to the fertile Delta area in search of food during times of famine.

- For several periods in its history, Egypt’s empire expanded into surrounding regions, including Canaan. During these times, young men and boys from those provinces were brought to Egypt to be trained in the pharaoh’s ways and later sent back home as regional rulers who were loyal to the pharaoh.

Also, a study on foreign children reared in the pharaoh’s nurseries during the eighteenth dynasty shows that some of these children became court officials, and that a few eventually attained high government posts. The similarities to the stories of Joseph and Moses (and Aper-el) are obvious.

- For two centuries ending in 1550 B.C., a foreign Asiatic people called the Hyksos actually ruled Egypt. After their expulsion, the new pharaoh extended his rule into Canaan and Syria, transporting back to Egypt many prisoners of war. In an address to the meeting of the Institute for Biblical Research last year, Hoffmeier explained that he believed that “after the expulsion of the Hyksos ruling and military elite, Pharaoh Ahmose and his successors discovered large numbers of Semitic-speaking peoples, including the Hebrews, in the Delta, who were subsequently forced to work alongside the POWs. This shift in status from being tolerated immigrants to an enslaved population described in Exodus 1:8 may represent the transition from the Hyksos period to the eighteenth Dynasty. It is worth noting that the practice of using forced labor for building projects is only documented for the period 1450 to 1200, the very time most biblical historians place the Israelites in Egypt. The realization that there were others enslaved along with the Hebrews may explain who the ‘mixed multitude’ of Exodus 12:38 are who joined the ‘freedom train.’”

Moses and the Exodus. It is simply too fantastic, say the minimalists. The ten plagues, a million-plus runaway slaves tra-

versing a desert, the miracles—all of these put the story squarely in the realm of fable and legend. Furthermore, how could the children of Israel escape from Egypt and the pharaoh’s army be destroyed without getting recorded in Egyptian annals?

In answer to the latter question, Hoffmeier agrees with his critics: such a momentous event would not have transpired without being recorded. But recorded *where*?

“I don’t know of any surviving papyrus documents from Egypt’s Delta,” says Hoffmeier. “It’s too wet. And papyrus [made from the reed-like plant of the same name] is where most of the records were kept. The inscriptions that we see on statues and temple façades tend to be propagandistic, what-we-want-you-to-know messages. And where papyrus records have survived, they tend to be from the desert areas. So we have very few of the day-to-day court records of 3,000 years of Egyptian history.”

While direct evidence for the Exodus is missing, the following circumstantial evidence supports viewing the Exodus as a historical event rather than a late, fictive legend:

- In a surviving Egyptian document called Leiden Papyrus 348, or-

ders are given to “distribute grain rations to the soldiers and to the *’Apiru* who transport stones to the great pylon of Rames[s]es.” This brings to mind Exodus 1:11, which says the Hebrews “built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.” While hotly debated, *’Apiru* is believed by some scholars to refer to the Hebrews, the *’Tbri*. If a future discovery of an inscription could link this word to the Hebrews, this document would prove to be our first direct extrabiblical reference to the children of Israel in slavery in Egypt.

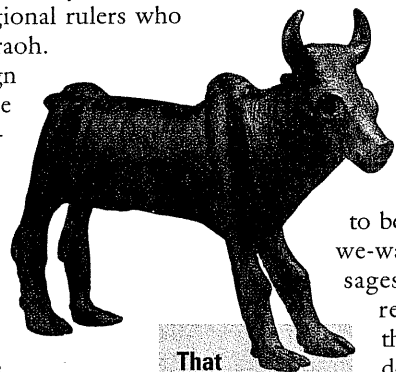
- Recent discoveries of military outposts on a road leading from Egypt into Canaan, built by Pharaoh Seti I and earlier kings in the thirteenth century B.C., shed new light on why a northern route for the Exodus would have meant war for the Israelites. Exodus 13:17 states: “When

Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’” Instead, the Bible explains, “God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness.”

- While it is virtually impossible 3,000 years later to retrace the footsteps of a people who escaped over a sand-swept wilderness, an Egyptian letter (*Anastasi III*) from guards at a “border crossing” between Egypt and the Sinai helps explain Moses’ insistent cry, “Let my people go!” The text indicates that in the thirteenth century the Egyptians maintained a tight border control, allowing no one to pass without a permit. The letter describes two slaves who—in a striking parallel to the Israelite escape—flee from the city of Rameses at night, are pursued by soldiers, but disappear into the Sinai wilderness. “When my letter reaches you,” writes the official to the border guard, “write to me about all that has happened to [them]. Who found their tracks? Which watch found their tracks? Write to me about all that has happened to them and how many people you send out after them.” Another inscription from the same cache of documents (*Anastasi VI*) records that an entire tribe gained permission to enter Egypt from Edom in search of food.

- If it seems incredible to believe that 600,000 men plus women and children could have survived as a people in the Sinai wilderness for 40 years, we may be misinterpreting the number, says Hoffmeier. Hebrew University professor Abraham Malamat, for one, points out that the Bible often refers to 600 and its multiples, as well as 1,000 and its multiples, typologically in order to convey the idea of a large military unit. “The issue of Exodus 12:37 is an interpretive one,” says Hoffmeier. “The Hebrew word *eleph* can be translated ‘thousand,’ but it is also rendered in the Bible as ‘clans’ and ‘military units.’ When I look at the question as an Egyptologist, I know that there are thought to have been 20,000 in the entire Egyptian army at the height of Egypt’s empire. And at the battle of Ai in Joshua 7, there was a severe military setback when 36 troops were killed. If you have an army of 600,000, that’s not a big setback.” In other words, the head count may have been far fewer than suggested by a literal reading of Exodus 12:37.

- While conservative scholars debate an “early” and “late” date for the Exodus



That idolatrous look: Recently unearthed, this Canaanite bull may have been one of those the Israelites were tempted to worship since it dates to the twelfth century B.C.

PHOTOS: LEFT TO RIGHT: BRONZE CALF BY ZEN BAROVAN; TEMPLE RECEIPT BY THE MOUSSAIEFF COLLECTION; LONDON; TEL DAN STEELE BY BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY SOCIETY

“KING DAVID WAS HERE”

By the 1980s, superskepticism about Israel's origins had reached as far as Kings David and Solomon, whose reigns stretched from about 1000 B.C. to 920 B.C. In the early 1990s, says Kenneth Kitchen of the University of Liverpool, “Thomas Thompson wrote a big, fat book on ancient Israel that more or less denied there was ever a united monarchy of Israel, and it claimed that people like David and Solomon were fictions.” It turned out to be bad timing because of several discoveries that followed soon after the book was published.

In 1993, excavators at the ancient city of Dan unearthed a stone slab dating to 841 B.C. It contained the first ancient extrabiblical reference to the “House of David”—a phrase used more than 20 times in the Old Testament. Immediately, the biblical minimalists proposed that a better rendering of the phrase would be “House of Dod,” referring to a Canaanite deity. In 1994, however, a second fragment belonging to the same

stone was found. The words it added to the original portion of text, says Kitchen, “limited the amount of ways you could interpret the text,” making “House of David” the obvious translation. Concerning “Dod,” Kitchen says, he has “demolished that false deity” in a recent scholarly article (in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*) by showing that this deity, in fact, never existed in ancient Canaan, but only in the linguistic inventions of nineteenth-century scholars.

Soon after the 1993 discovery, a second likely ninth-century B.C. reference to “House of David” came to light when André Lemaire reassessed a section of an inscribed stone called the Mesha Stele. And just last winter, Kitchen himself tentatively proposed the deci-

phering of a third mention of David in an ancient source—this one dating to 924 B.C., fewer than 50 years after David's death and four years after Solomon's. Inscribed on a temple wall in Thebes, the name appears in a list of places in Palestine that Pharaoh Shoshenq I is said to have raided successfully. While this portion of the victory boast is cracked and parts of it are missing, a probable interpretation for the line in question is “highlands of David.” Kitchen believes it may correspond to passages in the Book of Samuel where David is presented as a fugitive leader in the “highlands” of Judah.

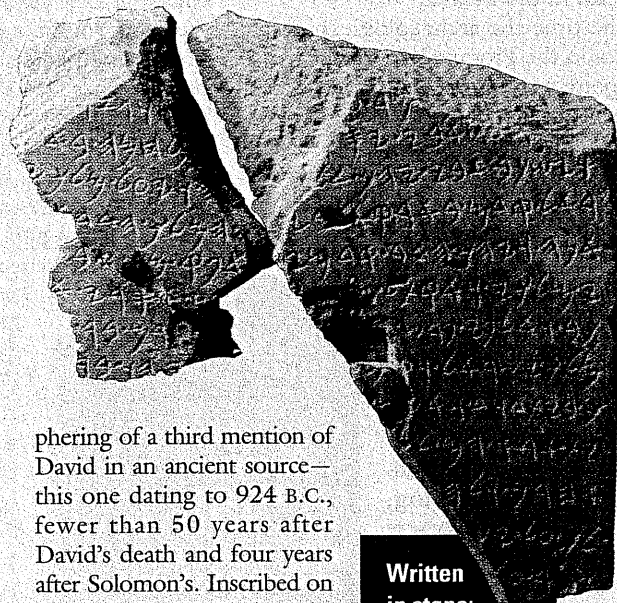
In addition to these David sightings, several recent references to King Solomon and his temple have surfaced in antiquities markets and have gained the attention of the academic world. One is a receipt for a donation to “the House of Yahweh,” which may date as early as the ninth century B.C. when Solomon's temple still stood in all its glory. Another is a seal with Solomon's name on it that could very well date to the tenth century B.C. when Solomon still lived.

Written in stone:

Discovered in two pieces, the Tel Dan Stele is helping to muffle those who say King David was a myth.

Tax deductible:

Dated to the 800s B.C., this ancient receipt for three shekels donated to the “Temple of Yahweh” gives us the oldest known reference outside the Bible to King Solomon's temple.



(fifteenth century or thirteenth century B.C.), all but the most skeptical scholars agree that the Israelites were in Canaan by the year 1208 B.C. This date was set a century ago with the discovery of the Merneptah Stele. This seven-foot high, black granite stone contains a victory hymn of Pharaoh Merneptah, which pro-

claims, “The Canaan is plundered with every hardship. / Ashkelon is taken, Gezer is captured, / [and] Yano'am reduced to nothing. / Israel is laid waste, his seed is no more.”

Not surprisingly, the minimalists downplay its significance, claiming it simply refers to an insignificant early nomadic

tribe—a proto-Israel, if you will. But the undeniable fact is that a pharaoh considered Israel's defeat worth inscribing on stone, and that a people called Israel lived in Canaan by that time. Just as fascinating are pictorial carvings on a temple wall in Luxor, Egypt, which Egyptologist Frank Yurco believes depict the destruction of

By Kevin D. Miller.

Ashkelon, Gezer, Yano'am, and the Israelites mentioned in the Merneptah Stele. If so, the first existing reference to Israel comes complete with pictures of them.

Joshua fit the battle?

By the time the archaeological search arrives in the Promised Land, the rocks and pottery scraps begin to cry out their history more loudly. Archaeologists love having more artifacts and inscriptions to study—but how best to interpret a rock's cry? Often, the interpretation ends at the very place the interpreters' prejudices begin.

Such prejudice got Hoffmeier flunked from a class he was taking in the early 1970s in graduate school. Raised in Egypt as a missionary kid, Hoffmeier found his first year of graduate studies unsettling, especially in a class where the professor was denying the history of Abraham in his lectures drawn from a book he was writing on the subject. "I remember the knots in my stomach when he was lecturing. He said the type of nomadic way of living in tents and riding on camels didn't fit the second millennium, but it did fit the first. But when he trotted out all the evidence for the first millennium, he made a statement in passing that his reason for that position was that texts from the ancient Near East rarely mention the use of tents."

Made curious by the word *rarely*, Hoffmeier began noticing numerous references to nomads from Syria and Palestine using tents in Egyptian texts he was reading for his hieroglyphics class. To his surprise, he also discovered that his professor had written extensively on a particular Egyptian text that described nomads and their tents in Syria-Palestine during the second millennium. "So he knew about this reference to how the Bedouin lived, but he didn't talk about it," Hoffmeier says. "I realized there's a pattern here of minimizing evidence that doesn't fit."

Though Hoffmeier failed the course, "not because of my work, but because of what he knew I stood for," he ultimately

had the last say when he published an article—on tents in the ancient Near East. "Later, I saw him at a wedding," Hoffmeier remembers. "He walked up to me and said, 'Well, it was a good article on tents. But there are a lot of other things in the book you haven't really dealt with.' But he conceded on that point that I was right. It was a great moral victory for me." It also taught Hoffmeier the lesson "that some of these experts are close-minded people. They're not willing to wrestle with different views," he says.

A good example of this can be seen in the cover stories

Time and *U.S. News & World Report* ran in

1995 on how archaeological discoveries

confirm and discredit the Bible. In their sections on the conquest

of the Promised Land, both painted a dark

portrait of the historical trustworthiness of the Book of Joshua.

Experts were quoted to say that of the sixteen cities said to have

been destroyed by Joshua's forces, only three have been shown

to have been destroyed during a time period that would fit

an Israelite conquest—and Jericho wasn't one of them.

The alleged nonevent at Jericho became the poster

child of the skeptics; few questioned the negative

conclusion since it was based on the findings of Kathleen Kenyon, who

excavated Jericho for six years in the 1950s. She believed the site was uninhabited

from 1500 B.C. to about 800 B.C., encompassing

the very time of the Exodus and the Israelite crossing

of the Jordan River into Canaan. What's for Israel to conquer, this line

of reasoning goes, if nobody's home?

This seemingly bleak assessment can be answered in part by the Bible itself,

says Hoffmeier. Many times scholars claim that the Book of Joshua paints the

conquest as one of burning every city to its foundations. "A careful reading of

Joshua shows there are only three cities that Joshua was specifically said to have burnt with fire—Jericho, Ai, and Hazor." So when a city lacks an expected

destruction level, "we should remember that to besiege a city does not necessarily mean to destroy a city. To capture a city may not involve destroying it in such a way that you'd find that destruction in the archaeological record." What would there be left to settle if everything was destroyed?

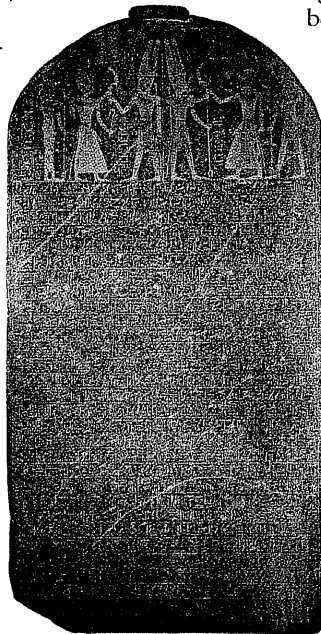
Furthermore, literary comparisons of Joshua with other war chronicles of the period show that the Book of Joshua reflects the rhetorical hyperbole commonly used in such writings. For example, Joshua 10:20 boasts that Joshua's men had "wiped out" their enemy, but in the very next phrase begins speaking unself-consciously of "the survivors."

Even archaeologically, the picture is not so bleak as the minimalists paint it to be, says Hoffmeier. A detailed look at the archaeological finds at Hazor, Ai, and Jericho puts the foregone conclusions of "uninhabited" and "not destroyed" into perspective.

• One of the three cities under question, Hazor, has, in fact, proven to have been inhabited and destroyed during the time of Joshua. Already current excavations have uncovered a palace with a small chapel area. Littered across its floor are the heads of decapitated statues of Canaanite deities and an Egyptian sphinx with the name of the pharaoh hacked out. "The palace was destroyed in such an inferno that many of the mud bricks actually turned to glass," says Hoffmeier. "No Canaanites would destroy their own deities, and no Egyptians would deface their monuments." Only the account in Joshua 11:11 of the Israelites burning "Hazor with fire" fits the evidence.

• "Ai is a little more complicated," admits Hoffmeier. The excavated site thus far shows that it indeed wasn't inhabited during the time of Joshua and wasn't destroyed at that time by fire. That is, if *this* site is, in fact, where ancient Ai was located. "Part of the problem is that, in the Bible, Ai and Bethel are always mentioned as being close to each other, and the identification of Ai has been based on the proposed identification of the site at Bethel—neither of which has been clearly demonstrated. We may be looking in the wrong place."

• "Jericho," says Hoffmeier, "is still an open question." Despite the problems it poses, there is archaeological agree-



Mother of all billboards: Pharaoh Merneptah (d. 1203 B.C.) boasted (prematurely!) on this seven-foot-high stone that "Israel is laid waste and his seed is not." It is the first extrabiblical mention of Israel.

ment. "A careful reading of

Joshua shows there are only three cities that Joshua was specifically said to have burnt with fire—Jericho, Ai, and Hazor." So when a city lacks an expected

destruction level, "we should remember that to besiege a city does not necessarily mean to destroy a city. To capture a city may not involve destroying it in such a way that you'd find that destruction in the archaeological record." What would there be left to settle if everything was destroyed?

Furthermore, literary comparisons of Joshua with other war chronicles of the period show that the Book of Joshua reflects the rhetorical hyperbole commonly used in such writings. For example, Joshua 10:20 boasts that Joshua's men had "wiped out" their enemy, but in the very next phrase begins speaking unself-consciously of "the survivors."

Even archaeologically, the picture is not so bleak as the minimalists paint it to be, says Hoffmeier. A detailed look at the archaeological finds at Hazor, Ai, and Jericho puts the foregone conclusions of "uninhabited" and "not destroyed" into perspective.

• One of the three cities under question, Hazor, has, in fact, proven to have been inhabited and destroyed during the time of Joshua. Already current excavations have uncovered a palace with a small chapel area. Littered across its floor are the heads of decapitated statues of Canaanite deities and an Egyptian sphinx with the name of the pharaoh hacked out. "The palace was destroyed in such an inferno that many of the mud bricks actually turned to glass," says Hoffmeier. "No Canaanites would destroy their own deities, and no Egyptians would deface their monuments." Only the account in Joshua 11:11 of the Israelites burning "Hazor with fire" fits the evidence.

• "Ai is a little more complicated," admits Hoffmeier. The excavated site thus far shows that it indeed wasn't inhabited during the time of Joshua and wasn't destroyed at that time by fire. That is, if *this* site is, in fact, where ancient Ai was located. "Part of the problem is that, in the Bible, Ai and Bethel are always mentioned as being close to each other, and the identification of Ai has been based on the proposed identification of the site at Bethel—neither of which has been clearly demonstrated. We may be looking in the wrong place."

• "Jericho," says Hoffmeier, "is still an open question." Despite the problems it poses, there is archaeological agree-

JÜRGEN LIEBE

ment on three important points that correspond directly with the biblical record: Jericho was destroyed violently sometime in the second millennium B.C.; it was occupied briefly and partially during the period of the Judges (a small palace from that period has been identified); and it was rebuilt completely in the days of King Ahab in the ninth century. The point of difference is over exactly when that first destruction occurred, and by whom.

Kenyon dated Jericho's destruction to 1570 B.C., when the Egyptians kicked the Hyksos out of their land and pursued them north to Jericho and beyond. But while her early findings were published in journals and in a popular book on the subject, only recently has the technical report of her excavations been completed and published. By studying it in detail, Bryant Wood, director of the Associates for Biblical Research, discovered evidence in her findings that sometimes contradicts Kenyon's own conclusions.

For example, one type of pottery she had unearthed was made for a limited time in the late fifteenth century—150 years after Kenyon's 1570 B.C. date of destruction. And seals were found for pharaohs from 1570 to as late as Amenhotep III, who died in 1349 B.C. Contrary to Kenyon's conclusions, these artifacts make dating Jericho's destruction feasible between the fifteenth and thirteenth centuries when most conservative scholars believe the Exodus occurred.

• The Bible says the Israelites crossed the Jordan River on dry ground and then besieged Jericho, seeing its walls fall after they had marched around it seven days. Wood finds this credible even in terms of natural causes (which God controlled for his purposes), given the seismological activity in the region. In an intriguing article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, he cites Stanford University geophysicist Amos Nur, who documents a 1927 earthquake and mudslide in this century "that cut off the flow of the Jordan." Nur adds: "Such cutoffs, typically lasting one to two days, have also been recorded in A.D. 1906, 1834, 1546, 1267, and 1160." In the 1927 quake, writes Wood, "a section of a cliff 150 feet high collapsed into the Jordan near the ford at Damiya, blocking the river for some 21 hours." Perhaps, he suggests, the collapse of Jericho's walls resulted from an aftershock to the earthquake that blocked the Jordan River and allowed the Israelites to cross into Canaan.

Fools with spades

Despite the current revisionist work, Hoffmeier and Kitchen are confident the future will side with those who take the Bible's history seriously. As seen with the three recently discovered "House of David" inscriptions (see "King David Was Here," p. 49), archaeologists keep unearthing objects straight from the world of the Bible. Almost yearly now, seals for the kings of Judah and Israel and surrounding Canaanite nations are being found. In the last number of years, a twelfth-century B.C. bronze bull and a sixteenth-century silver Canaanite calf were excavated, illustrating why the Israelites were constantly warned against idol worship.

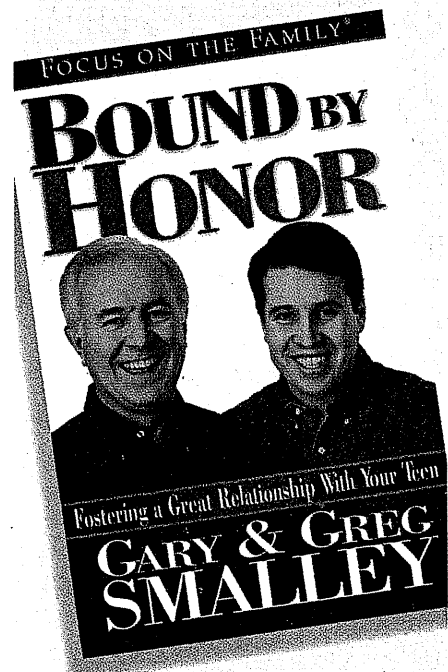
In 1979 a silver scroll from the seventh-century B.C. was found in a cave near Jerusalem. Containing the words in Numbers 6:24–26 ("May Yahweh bless and keep you; May Yahweh cause his face to shine upon you and grant you peace"), it forced revisionists to explain how their sixth-century B.C. composition date (or even later) for Numbers squared with a portion of that book appearing a century earlier.

Such discoveries have theological implications, says Hoffmeier. "There is a lot at stake here. The New Testament interweaves the salvific events of the Old Testament into it in such a way that Jesus the Passover Lamb loses significance if there is no historical Passover. And methodologically, there is the issue of how one interprets Scripture. In a sense we are seeing [with the minimalists] the Old Testament counterpart to the Jesus Seminar in New Testament studies. Also, what happens in scholarship today may feel irrelevant, but it soon trickles down into 'this is what the scholars say' in newspapers and television broadcasts."

For those who find such newspaper reports disturbing, Hoffmeier and Kitchen urge patience. "The biblical record, when you give it a fair test, fits its world and the world fits it," says Kitchen. "When scholars say such things as 'We have no evidence,' that merely means we do not know. Negative evidence is no evidence. It only takes one fool with a spade to dig up a new inscription and, whoosh!, that 'no evidence' disappears. I'm just amazed over the 40 years I've been in this business how we keep blundering into things you didn't expect that tie in with the Scriptures. If something doesn't seem to fit, the answer is to wait and see, not out of cowardice, not out of escapism, but just to see what happens when you have fuller evidence." **CT**

RESOURCES FROM
Focus on the Family

Parents and Teens Can Turn Anger to Honor



DURING Greg's teen years, best-selling author Gary Smalley went through a stormy time with his son. But now they've teamed up to share what they learned with others.

A relationship of honor, trust, respect, and love is possible with your teenager. Just like God designed it.

Look for **Bound by Honor**, coauthored by Gary Smalley and his son, Dr. Greg Smalley, wherever quality books are sold.

 Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
www.tyndale.com

Resources for Life