

Foreword

This volume is a “handbook” in the best sense: a convenient manual to which the reader may turn for succinct, authoritative information on a wide variety of archaeological topics. There is currently nothing like it.

There are, of course, several general textbooks, such as Amihai Mazar’s *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (1990); or the edited volume of Amnon Ben-Tor, *Archaeology of the Land of Israel* (1992). But these works are chronologically organized, and they can be very technical for the general reader. There are also several biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias that contain brief articles on certain aspects of Syro-Palestinian archaeology. But some of these are outdated, and the multivolume sets are too expensive for the average reader to buy. Thus, this volume is welcome because it fills a void. And it will be useful not only for lay people, students, and clergy but also for specialists who need to check something quickly.

Since I have used the term “Syro-Palestinian” rather than “biblical” archaeology, a word of explanation is in order. From its beginnings in the late 19th century, archaeology in the Holy Land—modern Israel, Jordan, the West Bank, and parts of southern Syria—has been closely identified with the Bible. This was especially true in America, where most archaeologists working in this part of the world were biblical scholars, often clergy, theologians, or seminary professors. Archaeology was typically considered not a discipline in itself but simply a branch of biblical studies. The “biblical archaeology” movement gained momentum from 1920 to about 1960 with the work of the legendary William Foxwell Albright (1890–1971) and his protégé George Ernest Wright (1909–74). The latter was my teacher and simultaneously the leading American Palestinian archaeologist of his day and Parkman Professor of Old Testament in the Divinity School of Harvard University. By the 1960s, however, our branch of archaeology was undergoing a dramatic transformation. And by the 1970s–1980s, it had become a highly specialized, professional, largely secular discipline, with its own methods and goals, which extend far beyond the scope of traditional biblical studies. Meanwhile, the burgeoning Israeli and Jordanian national schools, which had never formed any alliances with biblical studies, had developed along the same lines. Elsewhere, I have detailed the story of our branch of archaeology’s “coming of age” and its separation from its venerable parents, ancient Near Eastern studies and biblical studies.¹

1. See, for instance, “Syro-Palestinian and Biblical Archaeology,” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985) 31–74; also see “Biblical and Syro-Palestinian Archaeology: A State-of-the-Art Assessment at the Turn of the Millennium,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 8 (2000) 91–116.

At the very outset of the controversy about “biblical archaeology,” 30 years ago, I advocated (1) reviving Albright’s original *alternate* term, “Syro-Palestinian archaeology,” since it was more neutral; and (2) moving toward a real dialogue between two independent yet complementary disciplines, in the hope of writing new and better histories of ancient Israel. Unfortunately, that hope has thus far been only partially fulfilled. And in the past decade or so, a small but vocal school of “revisionist” biblical scholars has contended that archaeology is largely useless and that in fact no history of ancient Israel is possible, since the biblical stories are all myths—nothing but late Jewish propaganda of the Hellenistic era. As they put it, “the Bible is not about history at all.” Thus, a few of us archaeologists are now setting out to write our own “revisionist” histories of ancient Israel, based on facts rather than on faddish ideologies.²

Meanwhile, the term “Syro-Palestinian archaeology,” while useful in signaling the changes in our discipline throughout the 1970s–1990s, may now be obsolete and in need of replacement. “What’s in a name?” Everything!

(1) The first reason for an overall name change is that the national schools in the Middle East—who increasingly dominate the discipline in this postcolonial era—have already adopted alternate terms. Israeli archaeologists speak in Hebrew of the “archaeology of Eretz-Israel” (the “Land of Israel”). But this can be a highly charged term politically; and in any case it is too provincial. When speaking or writing in English, Israeli archaeologists still use the conventional term “Palestinian archaeology,” despite its now unfortunate associations. Alternatively, they employ our term “biblical archaeology” as a kind of shorthand for an international audience, even though in grammatical Hebrew it makes little sense.

Jordanian archaeologists, many of whom are of Palestinian origin, favor neither “biblical archaeology” (for obvious reasons), nor “Palestinian archaeology”—although one would think that the latter would be congenial to them. They typically speak, rather, of “the archaeology of Bilad esh-Sham” (approximately “Greater Syria,” in Arabic), and this despite often hostile relations between modern Jordan and Syria.

(2) The second argument for new terminology is that in the past few years there have emerged *real* “Palestinian” archaeologists—that is, those who, like none of the rest of us, are West Bank Palestinians, affiliated with the Department of Antiquities of the newly established “Palestinian Authority.” They are now excavating in *their* “Palestine” and even utilizing archaeology to justify their exclusive claims to that land.

If all of the older terms are now compromised (and they are), what do we propose? I can only suggest that we speak deliberately and specifically of the archaeology of each *modern* region of the Middle East, despite the fact that many of these borders are recent and arbitrary. Thus, the archaeology of “Israel”; the

2. The controversy about “revisionism,” and the contradictory archaeological evidence, is aired fully in my *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

“West Bank” (not “Samaria and Judea”); “Jordan”; and “Syria.” If an adjective is required for us to identify ourselves individually and professionally, we can simply say: “I am a Near Eastern archaeologist, specializing in X.” All the above may be awkward, but we have little choice if we are to avoid further politicization of our discipline. Alternatively, we might speak of the archaeology of the “southern Levant” or simply the “Levant.”

None of this shift in terminology, much less the revolutionary trends in our discipline over the past 30 years, diminishes the importance of archaeology for biblical studies. It merely redefines the relationship. Archaeology no longer seeks to “prove the Bible,” only to illuminate it by placing the biblical text in specific historical and cultural context that makes it more credible in some way. But archaeology at best can only help us to understand what really happened in the past. What these events mean, and may still mean, rests on one’s individual judgment—a question of faith, rather than of knowledge.

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