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Chapter One

Beyond the Texts: An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah
Beyond the Texts: An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah

By: William G. Dever

Countless books have been written about ancient Israel. But this work is the first mainstream history of ancient Israel to be published in English in 40 years. It also differs from previous scholarship by attempting to prove an alternative, archaeological-based history, as the title has it, a "portrait." I am a veteran of more than 50 years of fieldwork and research in the archaeology of Israel, with hundreds of publications. Even so, I believe that a portrait is the best that I, or anyone, can offer.

The distinguishing feature of this book is the employment of a rich array of archaeological data on ancient Israel and her neighbors as the primary evidence for illustrating the origins, the settlement horizon, and the monarchy, ca. 1300-586 BCE. In each chapter the biblical texts are brought into the picture only secondarily, and then only to compare and contrast their idealistic narratives with the "real-life" portrait that archaeology now provides.

In each chapter's conclusions, every purported incident in the Plan of typical Israelite village (all images courtesy of the Society for Biblical Literature)
Deuteronomistic history and the relevant prophetic works is evaluated in the light of the archaeological data. The account is then ranked along a multi-tier continuum from “proven” (rare) to “disproven,” with several intermediate categories in accord with the nature and extent of the archaeological evidence.

The model here is borrowed from jurisprudence: “presumed innocent unless/until proven guilty”; “the preponderance of the evidence”; and “proof beyond a reasonable doubt.”

In some cases, the biblical writers and editors can be shown to be substantially correct, suggestive that they had good sources, or simply did not skew the story at this point to suit their biases. In other cases, it is obvious that they got it wrong, or they have been oblivious to anything beyond their idealistic, theocratic agenda.

Whatever the case, perhaps as much as 80% of the historic detail fleshing out the story in this book would have been unavailable to us except on the basis of the vast information that archaeology has accumulated in the past generation or so, much of it synthesized here as truly historical data for the first time.

The 750-page volume has more that 130 charts and illustrations and some 700 references in the bibliography. The hundreds of extensive footnotes are grouped at the end of each chapter in order to keep the narrative flowing. The body of the book

Left: Plan of the 10th century site of Khirbet Qeiyafa.
Right: Khirbet Qeiyafa ostracon.
is written in the third person, with my personal reflections on the Hebrew Bible’s moral relevance and that of ancient Israel’s history as now understood confined to the conclusion.

The first long chapter deals with historiography and traces the development of scholarship on Israel’s history, from its heyday in the 1950s to the recent malaise and current half-hearted emphasis on “cultural memory.” Several Excurses deal with the “European Seminar on Method in Israel’s History” and its often postmodern agenda; Israel Finkelstein’s idiosyncratic “low chronology”; and failed models on early Israel in recent scholarship.

This volume, while innovative in many respects—especially as short of unique “history of Israel without the Bible”—is intended primarily as a handbook for scholars. But it is nevertheless accessible to many other readers interested in archaeology and biblical studies. The summaries in each chapter, amounting to more than 250 pages in total, could easily stand alone as a refreshingly different “real-life” history.

Readers and reviewers of this book may find it stimulating, but some will have misgivings. In particular, can an archaeological portrait, if it only has “anonymous” actors, really produce history, that is, without texts and identifiable characters? Some may admire the effort, but conclude that an objective synthesis of such vast and
complex archaeological data is now impossible. (And it might quickly become obsolete, which is why few would attempt it.) Finally, would a team work approach – combining the efforts of a Biblicist and an archaeologist not be more productive, more comprehensive?

In the conclusion (as in the Forward) I acknowledge that this is not the history of ancient Israel, but only a provisional portrait – or, as I put it, a “phenomenology.” But perhaps it will help to rejuvenate history-writing as a legitimate and rewarding pursuit for both Biblicists and Levantine archaeologists.

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Chapter Two

An Affair of Herbal Medicine?
The ‘Special’ Kitchen in the Royal Palace of Ebla
In antiquity, like today, humans needed a wide range of medicines, but until recently there has been little direct archaeological evidence for producing medicines. That evidence, however, also suggests that Near Eastern palaces may have been in the pharmaceutical business.

Most of the medical treatments documented in Ancient Near Eastern cuneiform texts dating to the 3rd-1st millennium BCE consisted of herbal remedies, but correlating ancient names with plant species remains very difficult. Medical texts describe ingredients and recipes to treat specific symptoms and to produce desired effects, such as emetics, purgatives, and expectorants. Plants were cooked, dried or crushed and mixed with carriers such as water, wine, beer, honey or milk — also to make them tastier. Indeed, plants used in medicine were often toxic or unpalatable and were not consumed as food. For several plant species it appears difficult to ascertain whether they were used as pharmacological remedies, psychoactive substances, or both. For some specific diseases (such as...
impotence) both therapeutic and magical treatments are documented, and in most cases a clear distinction between the two cannot be made.

Ebla and Its Royal Palace

Very few archaeological contexts excavated in the Ancient Near East have revealed clear evidence of medical plants remains and associated processing installations. The oldest is from Ebla, the capital of an important kingdom during the late Early Bronze Age (c. 2450-2300 BCE). Its political and economic relations with other regional centers of Syria and Mesopotamia (such as Mari, Kish and Nagar), and its administration have been reconstructed thanks to the discovery of thousands of cuneiform documents from the State Archives. The excavations carried out by the Italian Archaeological Expedition, headed since 1964 by Paolo Matthiae of Sapienza University of Rome, revealed a large palatial complex (Royal Palace G), so far excavated over 4.500 square meters.

Palace G, like other Early Bronze Age palaces in Syria and Mesopotamia, had units devoted to different functions, including for storing primary products and preparing food, as well as administrative and residential sectors. In the Royal Palace of Ebla, beside the Administrative Quarter (with the cuneiform archives and the ‘treasury’), sectors devoted to primary products were brought to light. Several specialized rooms were equipped with benches, basalt slabs, and installations for pressing olives and milling cereals. Moreover, hundreds of vessels, including cooking pots, storage jars and tablewares were found in their original position at the time of the final destruction of the palace (around 2300 BCE).
The great quantities of food resources collected by the central administration were processed to prepare meals for the royal family and the royal court, or to be redistributed as food rations and wages for the palace’s employees. Cuneiform texts from the royal archives which mention squads of flour female millers (named ‘dam kikken’) under the control of overseers, allow us to imagine these workspaces occupied by dozens of squatting women grinding cereals.

But a completely different picture emerges from one of the palace’s rooms, located in a very peculiar position, at the bottom of the Monumental Stairway in close proximity to the Court of Audience. The room was equipped with at least eight fireplaces, and several cooking pots were found in place over the hearths, and smashed above the floor. Analysis of the jars’ contents, and botanical remains scattered all over the room, show that the majority of species processed in the kitchen were wild herbs.

**The Special ‘Kitchen’ of Royal Palace G (room L.2890)**

If this room had been a “normal kitchen” we would expect large quantities of food plants,
and faunal remains. But only small amounts of food plants (21.6%) and almost no animal bones were collected, whereas a large amount of non-food species (78.4%), such as spurge, was identified in this room.

The discovery of a great quantity of spurge (Euphorbiaceae), together with other wild plant remains such as calendula, chamomile, poppy, cleavers, hawthorn, heliotrope in the ‘kitchen’ of Royal Palace G at Ebla, presents an exceptional case study.

The discovery of seeds and stems of wild herbs show that various parts of plants were used including flowers, leaves and roots. Dark burnt, solid incrustations, thin in section, and with a melted and glossy appearance (sometimes with bubbles), have been found inside the jars and at the bottom of the hearts. These incrustations are residues from different processes such as resin extraction (Euphorbia, in particular, exudes a milky resinous latex), or boiling plants in water, with the addition of olive oil or honey, in order to prepare medicinal drinks, infusions, or anointments.

Resin extraction could be obtained with a simple melting process: the latex of Euphorbia, which is water-soluble, is heated in water and the insoluble resin melts and rises to the surface to be skimmed off. The rest collects at the bottom of the vessel. After separation the resin hardens when exposed to air. Dried latex (Euphorbium) is still used as a drug in African countries, and extracts of Euphorbiaceae, which
have anti-inflammatory, analgesic, antioxidant and antimicrobial properties, are used today in alternative medicine in Europe. Overall, the wild species found in the kitchen grow naturally in semi-arid zones, where important families of medicinal plants are documented.

The quantity of products that could have been processed within the kitchen, using all eight hearths, and pots having a capacity from 40 to 70 liters, is remarkable. The combined presence of wild plants with medicinal or stimulant properties, the fire installations, the high number of vessels, and the very location of the kitchen, underlines the uniqueness of this room.

**Processing and Consuming Plants: Medicinal or Other Uses?**

Unfortunately we do not have clear references to the use of stimulants in texts from Ebla, although some ceremonies imply ritual consumption of foods and beverages during convivial occasions. The proximity of the kitchen to the official sector of the palace suggests that it was used to prepare beverages for special occasions in relation with reception and ceremonial activities. We have also suggested that some plants attested in the ‘kitchen’ have psychoactive properties and were used for the extraction of resins and preparation of beverages.
On the other hand, the processing of vegetal substances to prepare medical remedies is equally plausible, and well attested in ancient pharmaceutical texts. An extraordinary tablet from Palace G quotes several medicinal plants used for gastrointestinal, dermatological, and gall bladder diseases, and notes their exact doses and the therapy. Although the correlation of plant species and ancient plant names remains a difficult task, it has been recently suggested that the eblaic term gišne-gi-ba-tum may be interpreted as *euphorbia*. The term recurs in a cuneiform document mentioning the purchase of the medicinal plant by a man from the Royal entourage in exchange for a large amount of wool. Besides *Euphorbiaceae* some 34 other different taxa with medicinal properties were found, though in lower numbers. The beverages produced in “kitchen” L.2890 may have been used as pharmacological remedies for members of the royal court.
In addition to difficulty in ascertaining whether the beverages produced in the kitchen were used as pharmacological remedies or stimulants, there was no clear separation between medical and magical spheres in the Ancient Near East. Medical texts can prescribe both medical (asûtu) and magical treatments (āšipūtu), fulfilled by physicians (asum) and exorcists (masmassum or wāšipum). It is nevertheless interesting to speculate about the role of the palace, which was probably in the business of purchase and processing large quantities of herbs (a sort of ‘big pharma’?), expanding our notion of 3rd millennium BCE institutions.

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Chapter Three

The Bible as Tool for Learning to Evaluate Competing Voices in an Age of “Fake News”
Nicholas Lemann, professor of journalism at Columbia, opened his column, “Solving the Problem of Fake News” with the following observation:

What we are now calling fake news—misinformation that people fall for—is nothing new. Thousands of years ago, in the Republic, Plato offered up a hellish vision of people who mistake shadows cast on a wall for reality. In the Iliad, the Trojans fell for a fake horse. Shakespeare loved misinformation: in “Twelfth Night,” Viola disguises herself as a man and wins the love of another woman; in “The Tempest,” Caliban mistakes Stephano for a god.

While fake news is not unique, the rise of cable networks and the Internet has led to a spike in information, disinformation, misinformation, fabrication, and falsehood, and the consequences have been dire. The Stanford History Education Group recently published a study in which they evaluated the ability of 7,804 middle school, high school, and college students to “judge the credibility of information that floods young people’s smartphones, tablets, and computers.” They did not mince words: “Overall, young
people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up on one word: *bleak*.”

Lemann adopts a platonic suspicion regarding the analytical capacity of the common person, suggesting that the only institution that has the ability to fight fake news is the government. But this assessment is inadequate and irresponsible, especially for educators in institutions of higher learning.

There are better approaches. Because its composition and complexion are especially complicated, the Bible is an excellent tool for teaching students how to critically evaluate the contemporary onslaught of information. What the Bible *really* says is problematic. There are many storylines – both biblical and non-biblical – that have influenced conventional wisdom and our perception of the texts. But when approached responsibly, the Bible emerges as a multivalent production, whose competing voices can call into question all those storylines. By training students to read the Bible in a critical way, we equip them to read the world in like manner.
For example, as my students and I make our way through the Bible from Genesis to Joshua in my Introduction to the Bible course, I ask them to develop a register of markers that define who the “Israelites” were before the formation of the monarchy. The governing themes are not difficult to isolate. Israel is cast as a monotheistic community that worships the God who delivered its people en masse from Egypt. United by a common tribal identity and pastoralist lifestyle, Israel established an egalitarian community in the southern Levant that was characterized by such practices as circumcision, Sabbath, and the celebration of Passover. Indeed, Israel was so different from the hierarchically organized, urban-centered, polytheists who inhabited the land, that war was necessary for the new community to take its rightful place. In the end, it is this “unique” identity that distinguished the Israelites from the Canaanites. While this storyline has literary, historical, and theological value, as the dominant narrative, it may prevent the reader from encountering “alternative facts” – or, competing voices from elsewhere in the Bible itself.

The core narratives in the Book of Judges provide an excellent opportunity to confront this problem. As my students begin reading Judges, I ask them to consciously compare the depiction of Israel with that presented in the preceding material. This approach opens the door for students – some of whom are very familiar with the Bible – to disentangle competing threads, set aside prevailing accounts, and ask entirely new questions of the text, including:

- If the Exodus was a pivotal event in the people’s history, why is it not mentioned in the core narratives of Judges?
- If practices such as circumcision, Sabbath, and the celebration of Passover are central to the people’s identity, why are they absent from these texts?
- If the people are “monotheists,” why is Micah not condemned for making household gods in Judges 17-18?
- If we take the register of participants in the Song of Deborah seriously, who is Israel?
- If Israel consisted of tribally organized, egalitarian, monotheists, how does one explain Judges 9, which is set in an important urban center that incorporates a temple to Baal and another to El and is ruled over by a king?
The impact of this exercise is straightforward. The Bible is composed in a way that encourages students to approach it cautiously. The hope is that they will utilize these skills when reading and comparing contemporary claims.

A second example of this method revolves around the question, “Who was the good king?” David is well known for being a “man after God’s own heart” (see 1 Samuel 13:14 and Acts 13:22). Indeed, he is the touchstone by which good kings are evaluated throughout the books of Kings. By contrast, Saul is troubled. In appraising these traditions, I ask my students to put Saul and David on trial and discern who the good king really was.

There are two biblical texts that one can use to measure the integrity of a king: 1 Samuel 8 and Deuteronomy 17. To briefly summarize, 1 Samuel 8 warns against conscription (v. 11) and corveé – specifically for the purpose of plowing the fields of the king and reaping his harvest (vv. 12-13, vv. 15-17), while Deuteronomy 17 condemns the acquisition of many wives (v. 17).

With these requisites in view, a single story from the annals of Saul sets him apart from David. In 1 Samuel 11, news of the siege of Jabesh-gilead reached the king as he was “following the ox from the field” (v. 5). After hearing the news,
Saul dismembered a pair of oxen and sent the pieces to the Israelites requesting their military service. As opposed to David, who took a census (2 Samuel 24), presumably to find able bodies for the overseer of forced-labor (2 Samuel 20:24) and the commander of the army, Saul worked his own fields and mustered military support. Of course, a worthy litigator cannot, among other things, overlook the biblical claim that Saul had one wife (1 Samuel 14:15), while David had several (2 Samuel 16:22), and the issue of the household idol used to facilitate David’s escape from Saul’s men in 1 Samuel 19.

Though the evidence may not resolve the question of who the good king was, the exercise offers an example of how educators can used the Bible to teach students how to read deeply, to compile evidence from a variety of perspectives, and to use that evidence to challenge accepted paradigms.

Again, the leading themes in the Bible and its interpretation are important on literary, historical, and theological levels. However, if they are received without challenge – if they are accepted absent a hermeneutic of suspicion – the reader will fail to hear the opposing voices that are embedded in the text. By contrast, if one approaches the text critically, it can serve as an important tool for helping ourselves and our students develop skills for disentangling the web of information with which we are confronted, of recognizing the potentially negative impact of prevailing storylines, and of hearing alternative points of view – even if we do not agree with them.

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Chapter Four

Not Just for the Birds: Pigeons in the Roman and Byzantine Near East
When we think of pigeons today, it is generally not with admiration but rather annoyance or even dread of being targeted by them. The original meaning of ‘for the birds’ was that something was worthless, which may be where we get our modern conception of pigeons. Nonetheless pigeons have played a unique role in human history.

Pigeons and doves, which constitute the family *Columbidae*, are often referred to collectively as pigeons, but the pigeon is a larger form of these stout-bodies birds and doves the smaller. There are several biblical references to doves, such as in the book of Genesis when Noah sent a dove off after the great flood to see if the world was inhabitable (Genesis 8:8 -12). Doves or young pigeons were also considered acceptable sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible for those who could not afford more expensive animals. In Islamic tradition, the pigeon family is respected because they are believed to have assisted Muhammad by distracting his enemies outside the cave of Thaw’r during the Hijra. Several Near Eastern goddesses, such as Astarte, are also represented by doves.

Throughout history these birds have been used as messengers; Julius Caesar even
used them to communicate with his troops while on campaign in Gaul. In Victorian England the breeding of fancy pigeons became a craze. The common pigeon fascinated Charles Darwin, and his observations and breeding of the bird contributed directly to *On the Origin of Species*.

Unfortunately, western society today generally thinks of pigeons as pests rather than a valuable commodity. In New York City pigeons rank with cockroaches and rats as unappealing examples of urban wildlife, not so appealing a comparison. So it might be surprising to learn that pigeon-raising was a widespread livestock industry in the Roman world. What was it about the pigeon that the Romans embraced? First, let’s look at the requirements for raising pigeons and their antiquity.

Pigeons were the first domesticated bird. You did not have to be wealthy to keep and breed pigeons, and modest structures called dovecotes or pigeon towers could house them as long as they were protected from prey and shielded from winds. There are a wide variety of dovecotes depending on the environment and they are generally found near agricultural fields and vineyards. In some cases it has been argued they were purposely located near temples for use in sacrifices.

References to the uses of pigeon or doves appear in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts. At the 14th century BCE site of Emar, modern Tell Meskene, cuneiform documents note the sacrifice of doves for religious purposes. And according to the Papyrus Harris, the offerings Ramses III (1186-1155 BCE) gave to the temple at Karnak included 6510 doves. Pigeons have clearly played a part in the history of humankind, likely since the first agricultural communities.

Archaeological and literary research has shown that pigeons were raised primarily for the production of fertilizer and as a year-round source of meat (squab). Farmers during
the Roman period routinely raised pigeons. Pliny notes to the importance of pigeon dung, ranking it second only to thrushes dung as manure. The Roman scholar Varro stated that pigeon dung to be the best manure as it had the most heat and caused the ground to ferment, and the agricultural writer Columella maintained that bird dung gathered from pigeon towers was considered the best. Varro also indicated that pigeon dung should be broadcast like seed, and not placed in piles like cattle dung.

The importance of pigeon manure as a fertilizer cannot be underestimated; in many cases in the ancient Near East it was the main organic fertilizer available for traditional farmers, particularly in the southern parts of Israel and Jordan. It was used primarily as a high-quality fertilizer in annual crop farming, particularly with irrigated crops and tree orchards. The manure is especially effective in chalky and loess soils poor in minerals and organic matter. Such soils cannot support intensive agriculture without frequent fertilization.

Archaeologically we know that pigeon-rearing was already well established on the southern coastal plains of the Levant by the Hellenistic period. Hundreds of hewn underground installations date to this period and there are also many structures from the Roman and Byzantine Periods all over the region. Pigeon

Top: Ramsay at the dovecote at Masada. (Ramsay)
Center: Dovecote at Masada. (Ramsay)
Bottom: Dovecote at el-Habis, Petra. (Ramsay)
structures have been identified in archaeological contexts at Jericho, Jerusalem, Masada, Herodium, and Petra, to name a few. A newly discovered dovecote at ‘Ain al-Baida/‘Amman in Jordan, dating to the Iron Age, may help date other regional dovecotes to earlier periods than originally assumed. An excellent example of pictorial evidence dated to 100 BCE comes from a scene on the Palestrina mosaic located east of Rome at the sanctuary of Fortuna Primagenia. The mosaic illustrates landscape scenes along the Nile and includes an often overlooked example of a pigeon tower.

Recent work at the site of Shivta in the Negev documents Roman/Byzantine pigeon towers that were abandoned after their collapse in an earthquake and examines the role of pigeons in the ancient agricultural systems of this arid region. The archaeological excavations recovered a thick layer of manure left in its cells. It was calculated that the pigeon tower excavated contained about 1000 nesting cells producing up to twelve tons of manure annually. That amount of manure could have fertilized 1500 fruit trees or vines and a small garden plot.

The analysis of pigeon dung provided direct evidence for pigeon diet in antiquity. Pigeons ate grapes, figs, olives and dates, as well as several weed species, like mezereon, canary grass and fat hen. The botanical remains recovered from the dung also illustrate that the environment around Shivta, today mostly barren desert, was likely much greener in antiquity due to agricultural practices. These desert agricultural practices were necessary to support a burgeoning population, likely stemming from an increased military presence. Although pigeon towers have yet to be documented at other sites in the arid regions of southern Jordan, such as Bir Madkur and Qasr Umm
Rattam, extensive ancient field systems have been located around these sites and a terraced area around Umm Rattan is now called “the Roman Gardens.”

Pigeon rearing was an integral part of the mixed husbandry agricultural regime that dominated the Negev region from at least the Roman through the Byzantine periods. The structures that have been documented related to the raising of pigeons and the literary evidence of Roman era authors such as Pliny, Varro and Columella attest to the importance of pigeons in the ancient society of the Mediterranean. Even today in areas of the Near East pigeon rearing is an important part of the agricultural system, such as
as in Mit Ghamr, Egypt.

Examining the role of the pigeon from an agro-archaeological perspective illustrates the complexity of desert agriculture in the Near East and the importance of the pigeon in antiquity. By examining both the floral and fauna components of a collapsed pigeon tower we begin to understand the holistic nature of farming arid environments in antiquity, which may inform modern agricultural practices on arid landscapes. The lowly pigeon may still make a valuable contribution to sustainable agriculture.

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For Further Reading:


Alex Joffe is the editor of the Ancient Near East Today. The publication features contributions from diverse academics, a forum featuring debates of current developments from the field, and links to news and resources. The ANE Today covers the entire Near East, and each issue presents discussions ranging from the state of biblical archaeology to archaeology after the Arab Spring.

Cynthia Rufo is ASOR’s Archivist and Website Manager.
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