Hoffmeier, James K., and Alan Millard, eds.

The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions


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and Tradition: The Syrian Background of Israel’s Ancestors, Reprise” (D. E. Fleming); “Multiple-Month Ritual Calendars in the West Semitic World: Emar 446 and Leviticus 23” (R. S. Hess); “The Repopulation of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24, 27–31) in Light of Recent Study” (K. L. Younger Jr.); and “Methodological Issues in Reconstructing Language Systems from Epigraphic Fragments” (C. L. Miller). The final four papers address issues associated with “Hermeneutics and Theology”: “The Role of Context and the Promise of Archaeology in Biblical Interpretation from Early Judaism to Post Modernity” (J. M. Monson); “Ancient Near Eastern Mythography as It Relates to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis and the Cosmic Battle” (R. E. Averbeck); “‘Splendid Truths’ or ‘Prodigious Commotion’? Ancient Near Eastern Texts and the Study of the Bible” (D. B. Weisberg); and “Can We Write a History of Israel Today?” (A. G. Vaughn).

Z. Zevit’s opening essay gives a helpful history of the term “biblical archaeology” that highlights the role that American denominational institutions and private donors have played in maintaining the use of this term by refusing to fund excavations unless significant connections could be made between a site and the Bible. About half of U.S. institutions of higher education are church-sponsored or church-related. T. W. Thomas reinforces this view by pointing out that the theoretical base of classical biblical archaeology was theological, with an underlying assumption that biblical faith depends on the historical reality of the events that displayed the hand of God. While he claims that this view is found within Christianity and Judaism, “albeit in different ways” (21), it would have been more accurate to say that this view is found particularly among evangelical Protestant Christian denominations and scholars who work in biblical studies or Levantine archaeology who belong to them. Adherents to Orthodox Judaism and Conservative Judaism share this theological perspective, but there are very few such Jews in biblical scholarship and none I can think of in Levantine archaeology. Thomas is trying to make it seem as though these views represent the majority position in the Judeo-Christian tradition in a rhetorical move to win support for a position that lacks consensus.

D. Merling indirectly confirms the evangelical stance when he notes that the results of excavations that are at odds with biblical claims have led some to lose their faith (31) and directly when he claims that problems arise when one tries to separate faith from history (41). He argues that the present dilemma that many find in trying to harmonize the Bible and archaeological results is a false construct based on false expectations (32). Specifically, he argues that no evidence is nothing and that it constitutes the fallacy of the negative proof. In order to illustrate this principle, he proclaims that the absence of Late Bronze settlement at Ai/et-Tell cannot prove that the biblical story is erroneous because it rests on “non-evidence.” However, he has not fully understood the nature of negative evidence. The excavations conducted at et-Tell have clearly demonstrated that there was
no occupation at the site in the Late Bronze Age, which is positive, verified evidence that contradicts the biblical story of the conquest of Ai by Joshua and Israel according to the common dating scheme for the alleged “occupation and conquest.” Merling does not contest the identification of Ai with et-Tell, which is the other option open to those who want to uphold the historicity of this tradition. He is confusing the illegitimate argument that something can be considered verified because nothing seems to contradict it (an argument from silence) with the legitimate argument that something is proven historically unreliable because there is positive evidence that contradicts it.

By characterizing archaeology as a scattered collection of what has been found and, surprisingly, the Bible as a scattered record of what would have fit the biblical writers’ theological purposes, he can invoke his mantra that the lack of evidence does not mean that evidence is lacking, only that it has not yet been found. He critiques those who lose faith when archaeological findings contradict biblical claims, arguing that they have not understood that the two provide different information that is largely incapable of being compared; they parallel one another and sometimes complement or supplement each other but rarely intersect. He ends by saying that neither should be used to critique the other; each must live separately and be blended and amended cautiously. One could ask, then, why he would support the continuing use of the term “biblical archaeology,” since it has almost no intersection with the Bible.

E. Yamauchi shares many of these points, though he puts a different spin on them. He emphasizes the fragmentary and random nature of archaeological and inscriptional evidence that prevents the confirmation of a number of textual details in Homer but sees the striking confirmation of some elements to raise the possibility that Late Bronze information could be transmitted accurately over centuries (72). Using Homer’s poems as a parallel to the Bible, he concludes that “too often negative criticisms of the traditions are based upon arguments from silence and therefore represent not so much the inaccuracy of the traditions as the inadequacy of our archaeological data” (88). For him, as for Merling, the lack of corroborating evidence at the present time does not mean that evidence might not turn up in the future. But his attitude would appear to stem from the view that the role of archaeology is to “prove” the truth of biblical narrative, which Merling claims to have rejected.

A few contributors express awareness of the tension created by the different understandings of how meaning is created in contemporary literary theory and within their faith community. Some reject “secular” theories because they think they do not allow room for divine inspiration or revelation; others try to find theories that can support their faith-grounded approaches. Merling critiques correspondence theory, arguing that it is incorrect to equate theory with fact (40). He goes on to argue for coherence theory, in
which the criterion for truth becomes intelligibility and not verifiability through external checkpoints. This allows him to get around the sticky situation where certain archaeological findings have undercut claims made in the biblical texts that some Christians have taken as reflective of historical reality. However, coherence theory uses a definition of truth that is not normative in evangelical circles.

T. W. Thomas argues that biblical archaeology needs to be grounded in the current postprocessual paradigm rather than the dated, new archaeology processual paradigm (26). This is his attempt “to articulate a reasoned interfaith response to the minimalist approach to biblical archaeology” (20). He does not seem fully aware that postprocessualism is a form of postmodernism, the “big sin” and civilization-threatening paradigm of minimalists, according to W. Dever—but then neither does Dever. J. K Hoffmeier accepts Dever’s rejection of reader-response hermeneutic, which belongs to the condemned school of postmodern hermeneutic, in favor of his proposed literary analysis based on historical and social context and authorial intent (60). However, both seem unaware that authorial intent is a subjective, not objective, category whose definition is dependent upon the interpretation of the individual reader and therefore, varies from person to person.

A. G. Vaughn has clearly articulated the problem posed to evangelical scholars by the postmodern understanding that meaning is constructed by the interpreter; if the process is totally subjective, “then a person’s theological and philosophical presuppositions will dictate what conclusions he or she may draw” (378). He tries to overcome this “flaw” by using history to set necessary limits or boundaries around possible interpretations. But his proposal does not eliminate the subjective conundrum; historical re-creation is also grounded on personal experience and the interpretation of realia and texts. Thus, the understanding of the historical context of the biblical texts is as subjective as the understanding of the texts themselves. His approach may eliminate a few readings of texts that go against practices within ancient Judahite culture but cannot eliminate a range of possible readings or historical re-creations. There is no way to eliminate the relativity of truth in biblical interpretation once it is acknowledged that individuals construct meaning by interacting with the words of the biblical text. There is no way to be certain that one’s understanding corresponds to the author’s intended meaning. Bearing this in mind, A. Millard’s acknowledgement that “Our translations often carry nuances that exceed the intention of the ancient writers” (159) is probably correct but of little consequence. Since we cannot know what the ancient writers intended as their normative readings, we cannot establish “right” and “wrong” readings.

One denomination’s definition of “truth” or the definitive meaning of a biblical text is not necessarily shared by another. A practicing Christian (or Jew) can find consensus only
within his or her faith community and then only if that community envisages the need for a normative interpretation rather than conceding that the individual is free to formulate his or her own meaning based on personal interaction with the text. Since authorial intention, whether the author is human or divine, is only half the equation in the interpretive enterprise, even if one were to assert that the biblical text is divine revelation, there is no way to ensure that individual life histories will be such that everyone will assign meaning to a written text in the identical way, making the same mental links.

J. M. Monson incorrectly claims that J. Van Seters, T. L. Thompson and P. Davies “sometimes choose to set aside contextual study and its discipline altogether for various ideological and political reasons” (315). They are proposing a different, later historical context for the creation of the biblical narratives; however, that does not mean that they are ignoring contextual study. They provide reasons for situating the composition of the biblical texts in the Persian and/or Hellenistic periods. While I would agree that they have not often demonstrated why story details make better sense in the later context than in an earlier period, it is also the case that biblical archaeologists and so-called maximalists have not been able to establish that these same details can only be dated to the period in which they would place the original generation of the oral traditions that were written down and combined in the Iron Age. The claim by D. B. Weisberg that the currently known ancient Near Eastern parallels “demonstrate beyond doubt that the Bible is the product of the earlier age that it purports to be” (362) is as much an unsubstantiated assertion as is the proposal that the entire Hebrew Bible was written in the Persian and Hellenistic periods using very few sources dating at the earliest from the Assyrian period.

There is a visible trend among contributors in the current volume to seek parallels for biblical practices and details in early ancient Near Eastern texts and contexts; they then imply that the biblical material must likewise be early. They need to explore the length of time a given custom of practice remained in use, however, to establish the full chronological range within which such practices detailed in the biblical text were part of the larger ancient Near Eastern social fabric in order to be able to argue convincingly that such details must have been written down at an early period or handed down unaltered from an early period. Those wishing to suggest a late date of origin must do the same.

J. K. Hoffmeier asserts that ancient texts that appear to be making factual or historical observations should be treated as innocent until proven guilty or accurate until proven erroneous (59). B. E. Scolnic shares this view; he asserts that “biblical references to Migdol, both early and late, should not be dismissed, and biblical data on this subject should be respected and used” (108). A. Millard takes up the same refrain: “on the scientific level it is as proper to argue that the reports that ancient documents give should be credited unless there is conclusive, indisputable evidence against them, or very strong
statements indeed for which no alternatives can be found.” “For anyone holding the Bible to be divinely inspired, its records of past events will be true, if correctly interpreted, taking account of the author’s viewpoints” (160).

In a rhetorical move to allege that the historian’s stance should be similar to that of a modern Western court of law, Hoffmeier betrays his lack of adherence to the principles of a historian working in the twenty-first century. Millard does the same in his equation of historical and scientific method. Historians treat their sources as testimony, not evidence, and must question them in order to establish what evidence they might contain. A contemporary historian operates under the hermeneutic of suspicion, not one of trust. Thus, the stances of Hoffmeier, Scolnic, and Millard indicate that none embraces the conventions of historical investigation as it is currently practiced.

There are some important contributions among the articles, notwithstanding the larger issue of the legitimacy of biblical archaeology as an independent discipline. To mention two in particular, the article by S. Ortiz is exemplary in demonstrating how archaeological data must be interpreted using criteria internal to the discipline and not resorting to claims based on the biblical narratives. In his article R. S. Hess provides extrabiblical parallels for the repetitive nature of the festival calendar in Lev 23. All feature an apparently duplicate text side by side with one that goes back over festivals in the same month and even describes the same festival or one occurring on the same day (246–47). As Hess concludes, this can be seen as an accepted scribal practice and not the result of later editorial expansion or the evolutionary development of biblical festivals. However, it needs to be noted that the duplication could have arisen in all these scribal traditions from the secondary combination of entries that overlapped because they detailed festivals that took place in the same month.

J. K. Hoffmeier argues that biblical archaeology must be viewed as an interdisciplinary science that integrates biblical studies with all facets of the archaeology of the ancient Near East, not just that of ancient Israel (58). For T. W. Thomas, it is the place where archaeology and biblical studies interact (20). For J. M. Monson, archaeology’s primary role in relation to the Bible is to illuminate and establish probability, not to prove. “We must learn to enter the biblical world and harmonize it with the text without the burden of ‘proving’ historical reliability, much less theological truth” (317). He goes on to acknowledge, however, that even with exponential advances in understanding the geographical, historical, and cultural realities of the biblical world, the “uncomfortable paradoxes at times found in the text” are not likely to be removed (326).

This volume has highlighted for me the lack of a rationale for the perpetuation of the rubric “biblical archaeology.” The evangelical archaeologists who have contributed
articles directly or indirectly acknowledge that they must work within the theoretical framework of current archaeological methods and theories in order to be able to get site licenses and to be taken seriously within the field and the academy. It is unlikely that they will be able to secure site licenses by highlighting in their research agenda that they want to test the historical reliability of a biblical text or even to situate that text within the context of the site’s occupation. For working archaeologists, “biblical archaeology” is an artificial construct that is using excavation and survey data from regional categories such as Egyptian archaeology, Mesopotamian archaeology, Syro-Palestinian archaeology, or, more broadly, ancient Levantine archaeology, eastern Mediterranean archaeology, or ancient Near Eastern archaeology.

For textual scholars, the placing of the biblical texts within their ancient Syro-Palestinian or ancient Near Eastern cultural setting by using the results of excavations and surveys in various regions that are mentioned in the biblical text to better understand the historical level of conjunction can contribute to developing meanings that are consistent with current interpretations of the artifactual realia. But there seems even less reason or justification to place sites that are used for this purpose under the artificial heading “biblical archaeology.”

Finally, historians working with textual or artifactual materials relating to lands or political entities mentioned in the Bible need to employ current methods of evaluation that are appropriate to each type of material in order to convert it from testimony to potential evidence. They will draw on excavation and survey materials that have been generated under the rubric of the geographical region where the relevant sites are located, on the one hand, and on biblical and extrabiblical texts that are deemed potentially relevant. Whether their chosen area of investigation involves what A. G. Vaughn calls “positive history,” which essentially seems to be cultural history or history at the level of conjunction, or “negative history,” which seems to be political history or history at the level of event, they must employ the hermeneutic of suspicion when evaluating both kinds of source material in order for their work to be deemed “historical investigation” according to current definitions within the discipline. There is little justification for lumping together archaeological materials from various geographical regions that might have some bearing on historical investigations in which the Bible will serve as a potential source as well into a category, let alone a discipline, called “biblical archaeology.” The archaeological material that a historian will evaluate will vary, depending on the subject under investigation, and logically should be classified within its regional category for easy access.

It seems that “biblical archaeology” is something of a smokescreen that is hiding larger concerns in evangelical circles. One is how to relate archaeological results to the biblical
texts in a way that does not undermine the belief that, for the Bible to be “truth,” its contents must reflect historical reality. Experience has shown that some realia “disprove” the text when it is taken at face value; as a result, there is a noticeable trend voiced in these essays not to define the role of archaeology as a means of “proving” the accuracy of the biblical text but rather to provide background information to enrich one’s appreciation of the biblical text. This move has been necessitated more by the contradictory results of correlating text and artifact than by an embracing of the limitations of archaeological data because of the imprecise nature of pottery chronology and the recognition that many realia and practices reflected in material culture remained fashionable for a century or longer. Yet, having invested in the training of three generations of evangelicals as archaeologists, there is a need to find a way to use the results of their labors that will not threaten the “truth” of the biblical text.

The real issue that needs to be confronted, however, is our inability to establish a “definitive reading” of the biblical text that can define “the truth” with or without the input of archaeological realia and interpretation. Given the biological and neurological nature of our brains, it is inconceivable that every person will assign the same meaning to a given biblical text, whether it is the product of human creativity and intentionality, divine inspiration, or divine revelation. Thus, the bigger hurdle confronting evangelical biblical scholars is how to uphold the equation of the Bible with truth, regardless of whether or not that truth is grounded in historical reality in all of its textual expressions. Is it permissible for everyone’s truth to be different?