

ORIGINS REVISITED:
REFINING THE THEORY OF CONQUEST BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

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I expect that many will shudder at the title of this article. However, after some reflection I am confident there will be an acknowledgement that the issue must be reviewed, to avoid the type of dogmatism that spells the death of any academic discipline. I was indeed concerned that such a disease was creeping into biblical archaeology when I read a quote by a scholar I admire greatly, William Dever. For in a discussion with some minimalist colleagues Dever is quoted as stating (in a 1997 conference sponsored by the Biblical Archaeological Review), "If you guys think I or the Israeli archaeologists are looking for the Israelite conquest [of Canaan] archaeologically, you're wrong. We've given that up. We've given up the patriarchs. That's a dead issue."¹ Yet, I was encouraged in a later article, when Dever argues strongly for evidence pointing towards the settled peoples of Israel prior to the divided monarchy and pre-monarchy historicity.² However, due to the absence of an adequate viable theory relating to the exodus and conquest, and since the whole goal of research and publication is to have collegial revision and refinement, not academic dogmatism, I would like to propose a concept that begins to work through the issues relating to the archaeological testimony. For as the anonymous commentator "S.F." points out in BAR, there is much to the bible that is

¹ H. Halkin, Hillel "Can the Bible be Trusted?" *Commentary* (Jul/Aug.99, Vol. 108, Issue 1): 39

² W. G. Dever, "Save us from Postmodern Malarkey" *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Vol. 26, No. 2, 2000)

historical, and that it is not necessary that archaeology “refute” biblical narratives or claims to history.³ Indeed, even William Dever contends that the minimalists have not won the day as he argues that the many aspects of the biblical literary record are still worth searching for.⁴ Yet, in this discussion I do not want to discard the arguments of those who have defined themselves with a minimalistic reputation, for they too bring much to the table regarding the “origins” of Israel.

Due to the myriad of chronological disagreements about the exodus, and the minimalist argument that it never happened, it is evident that conquest controversies will also exist. While traditionally the conquest, as recorded in biblical literature, has been interpreted as a large-scale military incursion, this concept has seen many revisions over the decades. As Silberman points out, this is the result of a growing number of archaeologists contending that the Joshua invasion is inconsistent with the archaeological record.⁵

Generally scholars agree that there are strong inconsistencies between the literary record and the archaeological evidence, and scholarship has proposed four prevailing theories. The first theory is that the conquest was the fabrication of later ideological imagination. Termed “conquest by imagination theory” by T.L. Thompson, this theory has struggled for significant acceptance as it depends on a selective use of archaeological data and an over-reliance on the dubious argument of climactic change.⁶

³ S.F. “Is the Bible a Bunch of Historical Hoey?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (May/June 2002; Vol. 28):6

⁴ H. Halkin, “Trusted?”: 40

⁵ N. Silberman, “Who were the Israelites” *Archaeology* (Vol. 45, 1992, March): 23

⁶ D. Merling, *The Book of Joshua: Its Themes and Role in Archaeological Discussions* (Berrian Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997): 20-54.

In contrast, the other three theories explaining the emergence of Israel in Canaan are relatively popular. The first is the “peaceful migration” model, which is associated with the German scholars Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth. Appealing to such evidence as the Amarna letters, they concluded that the Israelite settlement of Canaan was due to a gradual immigration into the land, not a military offensive. Alt and Noth further theorized that the Israelites must have been pastoral nomads who slowly filtered into the settled land from the desert, seeking pastures for their sheep. After a long period of uneasy coexistence with the indigenous population, the Israelites eventually overran, and destroyed, the Canaanite city-states.⁷ This migration theory has gained in popularity and influence through the years, but clearly is at odds in some respects with the literary record of the biblical book of Joshua and its idealized image of battles and military victories.

The “Indigenous Revolt” hypothesis is the third concept for the formation of Israel. Popularized by George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald, this concept introduces the theory that actually redefines the ethnic origin of the Israelite nation. This model suggests that there was no external conquest of Canaan; it was an indigenous liberation movement among depressed Canaanite peasants living in the countryside. These peasants, who formed the lowest level of their culture’s highly stratified social order, engaged in an egalitarian rebellion, overthrew their urban overlords, and became “Israelites.” This theory, which repudiates the biblical literary scenario, has its academic defenders who argue that it is most compatible with archaeological data.⁸ The fourth

⁷ N. Silberman, “Who were the Israelites” *Archaeology* (Vol. 45, 1992, March):28

⁸ H. Shanks, “‘David’ Found at Dan,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, (20[2] March/April. 1994):

theory was the “two-pronged” exodus popularized by Albright, but now largely abandoned, of which more will be mentioned later.

It is clear that the main stream scholarly views attempt to corroborate the two most foreboding issues: A. the existence of Israel, and B. the archaeological data. However, all the aforementioned views, not to mention the traditional biblical interpretation of the conquest of Canaan, cause severe problems for some area of information. The egalitarian rebellion approach does little to acknowledge, however stylized it may be, the biblical literature. The traditional biblical interpretation of a sudden intense military conflict against centralized cities and armies seems to defy the archaeological evidence regarding the demographics of the region. Finally the gradual “peaceful” migration model defies the testimony of the Amarna letters (if indeed they are applied to the conquest). Furthermore the migration model ignores the biblical literature and even the 13th century account of the Merneptah stele that Israel was not at peace with the surrounding nations. It is in response to the failure of all of these various accounts that this dissertation asserts a revised hypothesis that does fit the available evidence.

However before I propose another alternative, I wish to review why the “origins of Israel” is largely considered a “dead issue”. W.F. Albright., argues for a date of 1290 B.C.E., in large part this decision is based upon two suppositional pillars. The first pillar is the internal biblical statement of Exodus 11 that the people built a store city (and the Bible states that it was named Raamses) presumably after the 13th century B.C.E. Pharaoh. The second pillar in Albright’s decision for a 13th century B.C.E. date was Glueck’s discovery that the Edomite territory was not settled with a sedentary population

until the 13th century B.C.E.⁹ In addition, Albright affirmed that the “Habiru” mentioned in the Amarna letters refers to the Hebrew people who escaped Egypt earlier. In this argument then Albright draws close to Meyers conclusion that the Israelite exodus is equivalent to the Hyksos expulsion from Egypt. However, in order to affirm the evidence Albright then buys into the suggestion of Sayce¹⁰ of a two pronged exodus: A. the first prong roughly equivalent to the Hyksos expulsion; B. the exodus of Judah led by Moses in 1290 B.C.E. The problem with Albright’s enthusiasm, to embrace the Exodus 11 statement as a dateable indication of the exodus, does not bode well for this father of biblical archaeology. Albright’s conclusion leaves out a very simple consideration that every biblical scholar must wrestle with, the influence of redactors in the writing and transmission of the text. Secondly, it omits the consideration of a name change of an older store city (thereby changing the building date to a more ancient milieu).

The problem with Albright’s second pillar for dating the exodus at 1290 B.C.E. is one of assumptions. For while Glueck’s findings indicate that the Edomite territory was not settled by a sedentary population until the 13th century B.C.E., this assumes two things, if we are relating it to the dating of the exodus. The first assumption is that the Edomites of the exodus record were necessarily a city based people, rather than clan-village based semi-nomadic peoples. Secondly it assumes that the Israelites, upon “conquering the land” immediately gave up their semi-nomadic life—style and became a sedentary population. Both assumptions are unfounded and thereby nullify any “objective” material evidence pointing to a 13th century date for the exodus. Indeed, this

⁹ J.P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History* (Wheaton, Illinois; Van Kampen Press, 1950): 99.

¹⁰ A.H. Sayce, *The Early History of the Hebrews* (Curtis Books, N.Y.; N.Y., 1987), 158

project shall show that a date of approximately 1446 - 1400 B.C.E. readily fits all of the evidence available to Albright, without the need for a “two pronged exodus”.

Obviously the issue is not so simplistic as to be reviewed in one article, so for the sake of brevity we will move along. Suffice it to say that when looking at the more traditional date of 1406 B.C.E., Dever provides key information that draws out the essential issue of the nomadic pastoral life-style within Canaan and highlights that this is a very important issue throughout the late Bronze age.¹¹ Finkelstein also highlights the fact that the central hill country was covered with semi-nomadic peoples.¹²

Without putting too fine a point on it, there is reason to re-evaluate the traditional date in light of this information, though it has taken over a decade to get around to it. To this end I suggest that the origin issue be re-evaluated with the hypothesis that the conquest was waged against the hinter-land pastoralist population of Canaan, and only indirectly came in contact with most major city military resources (though it still resulted in military victories). In this way then the traditional interpretation of the biblical literature of Joshua is highly stylized, though in part it is an issue of translation. For a careful examination of the “range of meaning” of key terms like, “king” will reveal the literary description can be considered accurate. The result was a systematic and relatively peaceful migration into the hinterland, forcing out only the pastoralist populations.

This article suggests that Moses, and later Joshua’s strategy had three key goals. 1. Displace the pastoralist population of a region and 2. Secure the precious water resources vital for survival in a pastoralist environment. 3. Exert control over the hinterland and therefore the economies of the cities which depend upon its resources. Is it

¹¹ W.G. Dever, “The Middle Bronze Age” *The Biblical Archaeologist* V. 50(Sept. 1987)

¹² Finkelstein, “Searching for Israelite Origins” pg. 39.

coincidental that the two regions to have relatively large Canaanite pastoralist populations were those areas recorded as the focus of the initial stages of the conquest? This is an issue that requires some further investigation. It is clear that this theory then agrees with Glueck's findings that it was pastoralists who occupied the trans-jordan region (which caused such a crisis for Albright). In addition, this revised understanding of the conquest of Canaan reflects the notion set forth by Alt and Noth, that the Israelites were pastoralist peoples. However in contrast to Noth's proposal that the settlement was gradual, this dissertation suggests that the invading Israelite populace simply displaced the previous pastoralist population, hence the apparent "blitzkrieg" style conquest recorded in Joshua.

The result of this destruction and displacement of the pastoralist population, and the subsequent economic and resource pressure placed upon the Canaanite city-states, resulted in turmoil noted in the Amarna letters. This is understandable when one considers two key factors: 1. The cities were dependent upon the hinterland for resources, and would therefore be in a precarious position economically as a result of the settlement of Israel. 2. The evidence clearly shows that the central hill country, recorded as the area of primary conquest in Joshua, was indeed a place where the "archaeological" Israel finally emerged (after many successive generations the people gave up their semi-nomadic life-style).

The result of this "conquest of the pastoralists" allowed the Israelite people to exert significant economic and resource control over the region as they were an integral part of the economic system. This integration then leads to the "national identity" later in Judges. In addition, this theory incorporates aspects of Mendenhall & Gottwald's

“Indigenous Revolt” theory. For according to the pastoralist theory, when the Israelites chose to exercise this economic pressure over the city-states, we see the rise of the connotation that the “Habiru” were simply a “lower class of people” appear.

Over the next few months and years I hope to demonstrate how the archaeological findings that have thus far discounted the conquest of Canaan by Joshua and the biblical literature, do not necessarily write off such accounts. Indeed, the issues of sedentarization of semi-nomadic peoples, the role of water resources, and the economic dependence of the cities all play key roles in understanding the conquest of Canaan, both in archaeological terms, as well as literary terms. I encourage all the scholars that have “given up this issue for dead” to re-evaluate it one more time, and avoid the dogmatism that has crept into this noble profession.

While the conquest may not have been the “great conquest of cities and nations” that we traditionally read into the text, we may at last have a glimpse of the truth. Indeed, I believe that we will learn much about what the text itself actually says, and how tradition has stylized the conquest, while the literary text itself remains true. For even the minimalists have been caught in the trap of a “traditional understanding of the text”, but the minimalists also provide part of solution to this mystery.

Case in point, Philip Davies interprets the Joshua testimony in the traditional fashion, thereby resulting in a rigid framework for interpreting the archaeological evidence: “The Book of Joshua describes it as a kind of blitzkrieg, one Canaanite city after another falling to the Israelite attack.”¹³ However, as future articles will show, the actual biblical textual meanings support a conquest that is indeed consonant with that of

¹³ Philip Davies, “What Separates the Minimalist from the Maximalist?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Vol. 26, No. 2, 2000): 26.

Davies' account relating to the "scholarly consensus". For while Davies scholastic time frame is different from the biblical text, the account of Davies, and the literary record both suggest that, "Their material culture is generally indistinguishable from that of the surrounding population, although allowance must be made for their particular economic lifestyle. These people ... did not exterminate the indigenous inhabitants or even try to. They established, for whatever reason, a new conglomeration of settlements in the central highlands¹⁴ of Palestine ... the need for cooperation and the nonurban lifestyle almost certainly encouraged a sense of ethnic identity. Whether these people yet called themselves "Israel," I have no idea."¹⁵

Clearly Davies has a very rigid view of the Joshua conquest narrative, which is par for the scholastic course. Obviously Davies rejects the Joshua narrative as historical, largely due to such a rigid understanding of the conquest. However, Davies does still note some parallels between the above summary of archaeological evidence and the Judges narrative (which interestingly enough is in complete agreement with the "pastoralist" theory presented in this article): "They eventually formed part of the population of two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. But these kingdoms also included an urban population, drawn from people other than the highland farmers. Even the Biblical narrative states clearly that both Israelites and Canaanites lived together throughout the kingdom of Israel. (See, for example, Judges 3: 5-6: "The Israelites settled among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites; they took their daughters to wife and

¹⁴ It is important to remember that Davies here is speaking of an "Iron-Age" Israel. According to the traditional biblical chronology this would be a description of the time period of the Judges.

¹⁵ Davies, "What Separates": 27

gave their own daughters to their sons ...).”¹⁶ What more can I say, but, “Look at it again.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.