

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*  
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**Shiur #6a: *Tanakh* and Archaeology**

**A. Background**

The relations between *Tanakh* and archaeology have undergone many changes since the study of the antiquities of Eretz Yisrael began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>[1]</sup> The earliest studies were conducted by American and British scholars such as Edward Robinson (1794-1863) and Charles Warren (1840-1927), who had been dispatched in order to gain a deeper familiarity with the world of the Bible and to find actual traces of the biblical narratives. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious scholars such as William Albright (1891-1971) and G. Ernest Wright (1909-1974) introduced what became a central endeavor in the field: they sought, by means of archaeological findings, to demonstrate the authenticity of biblical narratives and thereby to disprove the documentary hypothesis (which we discussed at length in the previous chapter). As an outgrowth of this approach, a similar school of scholarship arose in Israel, too, headed by Yigael Yadin (1917-1984). Although non-observant religiously, Yadin viewed the strengthening of the bond between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel through archaeology as an important Zionist endeavor. The efforts included, *inter alia*, the search for testimonies concerning important historical events and the activities of the various kings of Israel and Judea. The assumption guiding these scholars was that the *Tanakh* should be treated as a historical source which can serve to explain archaeological findings, and whose own authenticity may in turn be demonstrated by the fieldwork.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some new trends appeared which gradually moved themselves further away from the original orientation of biblical archaeology. First, a school that became known as the "New Archaeology" sought to sever itself from the historical context of the *Tanakh*, and to view archaeology as an independent discipline dealing with the processes of cultural and social development borne out by the findings, without reference to any particular events recorded in the *Tanakh*. Second, some of the "New Archaeologists" adopted a more extreme approach that tended to negate the historical validity of the *Tanakh*, concerning everything up to the period of the divided kingdom, especially the period of Achav (in the first half of the ninth-century B.C.E. – see *Melakhim* I, ch.16). This school is related to some extent to trends among scholarly circles in Europe (especially in Scandinavia),<sup>[2]</sup> and is known as the "minimalist approach." It argues that the biblical record should not be regarded as historical fact so long as there is no positive archaeological evidence supporting it, since – according to the proponents of this view – the *Tanakh* was written with a bias, long after the events actually took place.<sup>[3]</sup> The narratives of the Torah, they maintain, along with the Books of *Yehoshua*, *Shoftim*, *Shmuel*, and even the beginning of *Sefer Melakhim*, are stories that have almost no historical basis, and they contradict the archaeological findings from the relevant periods. Hence, they are to be considered merely as myths and legends

that were created by the inhabitants of Eretz Yisrael in order to explain their national and social origins.

The same approach is held by a certain school of contemporary Israeli scholars, whose views we will discuss here. One of the most prominent representatives of this approach is Zeev Herzog. In a newspaper article that raised a storm of controversy, Herzog argued,

"After 70 years of intensive excavation in Eretz Yisrael, archaeologists are arriving at a frightening conclusion: the 'deeds of the fathers' are a fable; we did not go down to Egypt nor did we come up from there; we did not conquer the land, and there is no trace of the empire of David and Shlomo."<sup>[4]</sup>

Herzog's popular article led to extensive discussion of these questions, and conferences, articles and books appeared in response to the minimalist approach.<sup>[5]</sup>

In general, this position is extreme and controversial, and many scholars distance themselves from it, regarding it as a passing trend. The argument of Herzog and those like him is not comprised purely of archaeological elements, but also displays prominently political opinions and subjective world-views. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are scholars who belong to the "maximalist approach," maintaining that everything in the *Tanakh* should be accepted as historical truth so long as there is no proof to the contrary.<sup>[6]</sup> But the majority of scholars are not identified with either camp, and treat each discovery on its own merits.

In this chapter we shall discuss questions that have been raised for the most part by the minimalists and have received some media attention. We will also look at a number of questions that have been raised by scholars who do not approach archaeological study with a preconceived rejection of the authenticity of the Bible, but rather approach its findings with an objective view appropriate to scientific enquiry.

One might ask to what extent the questions arising from archaeological research should interest someone who believes in the authenticity and reliability of the biblical account. Clearly, this research must be approached with appropriate reservations and caution. Firstly, it must be remembered that the approach that casts doubt on the reliability of the *Tanakh* is based on the conclusions prevalent in the world of Bible study – a realm which itself is far from offering unequivocal, decisive proofs, as we have seen in the previous chapters. In addition, there is some doubt as to whether the discipline of archaeology may be defined as a "pure" science: many fundamental assumptions in the field, concerning the dating of different findings, as well as the methods of ascertaining their date, etc., have not been conclusively proven. Likewise, the assumptions of the "New Archaeology" are often based on the claim that there have been no findings in support of certain events recorded in *Tanakh*. However, this argument from absence is a major weakness of the approach: "'We have not found...' is not a proof" (*Ketubot 23b*),<sup>[7]</sup> and it happens on occasion that a finding discovered quite by accident contradicts entire theories constructed previously, as we shall see. The frequent

updating of archaeological approaches likewise contributes little reliability to the findings. Finally, just as in the realm of the literary criticism of the *Tanakh*, it is difficult to ignore the bias – sometimes openly declared – on the part of many archaeologists of the minimalist school, who have joined together with the "new historians"<sup>[8]</sup> and follow a political agenda, both in Israel and elsewhere.<sup>[9]</sup> For example, Herzog concludes his controversial article mentioned above with the words,

"It turns out that Israeli society is partially ready to recognize the injustice done to the Arab inhabitants of the land... but is not yet sturdy enough to adopt the archaeological facts which shatter the biblical myth."<sup>[10]</sup>

Countering Herzog's claims, Bible scholar Sarah Japhet argues:

"Is history limited only to what archaeology is able to attest to? If societies and cultures did not leave behind material artifacts, did they not exist? ... This bitter protest arises from the fact that the archaeology of the Land of Israel, and perhaps of the Ancient East in its entirety, started out by taking upon itself a task that it could not fulfill, nor should it have to: to 'prove history' or to disprove it... The role of archaeology is to expose the ancient material culture and to depict, as far as possible, the characteristics of the various cultures... Nevertheless, it remains just one of the sources for reconstructing history, and it should by no means be entrusted with more than that task... We must remind ourselves that archaeology, too, is a human science, with room for working assumptions and for discretion; whose data are incessantly changing, and whose conclusions change over time and are certainly not absolute."<sup>[11]</sup>

These arguments and others have led some parts of the religious world to regard any involvement in or appeal to biblical archaeology – and especially the "New Archaeology" – as unnecessary. The basic assumption is that the *Tanakh* describes an absolute material reality, and there is therefore no need to become too excited over findings that sit well with the biblical narrative, and conversely, no need to be overly agitated about findings that contradict the narrative. The question of the degree to which archaeological findings conform with the *Tanakh*, to this view, simply a matter of time.

However, a scornful attitude towards the study of archaeology does not solve the questions that arise from this area of study, and does not justify the complete rejection of its findings. In addition, a large portion of archaeological discoveries do indeed accord with the biblical narrative, shedding light on our understanding of various stories, and helping to deepen our connection with the world of the *Tanakh*.

We shall briefly examine the discussion in terms of the various Biblical periods that are subject to controversy. For each period we will first note the seeming contradictions between the biblical account and the relevant archaeological discoveries; we will then address the question of whether the findings represent a scientific consensus, and if so – how they may be reconciled with the biblical narrative, and to what extent they require a new understanding of it. Thereafter, we will examine the

opposite perspective – the correspondence between the archaeological findings of each period and the biblical narrative, and the arguments for the reliability of the text that arise from these discoveries. Obviously, much has been written on these subjects and we will only present here very briefly some of the central points, in the hope that they may serve as an introduction to understanding the broader discussion.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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[1] Concerning the various trends in the relationship between *Tanakh* and archaeology, see, for example, S. Bunimowitz and A. Faust, "*Ha-Archeologia shel Tekufat ha-Mikra bi-Shenot ha-Alpayim*," in A. Barukh, A. Levi-Raifer and A. Faust (eds.), *Chiddushim be-Cheker Yerushalayim – ha-Kovetz ha-14*, Ramat Gan 5769, pp. 7-23.

[2] This so-called "nihilist" approach rejects completely the historical record of the *Tanakh*, claiming that it was written only in the Hellenistic or even the Roman period. This approach has sometimes been prompted by considerations that are not necessarily scientific and objective, and for this reason it has attracted vehement criticism; see Bunimowitz and Faust (above, n. 1), p. 10.

[3] We addressed these claims themselves in chapter 3.

[4] Z. Herzog, "*Ha-Tanakh – Ein Mimtzaim ba-Shetach*," *Haaretz*, 29 October 1999. The article was translated into English and published in *Biblical Archaeology Review* and can be found at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/704190/posts>.

[5] Such as: *Al Atar* 7, 5760; Y.L. Levin and A. Mazar (eds.), *Ha-Pulmus al ha-Emet ha-Historit ba-Mikra*, Jerusalem 5761; *Beit Mikra* 49, 1 (176), 5764.

[6] Among them is A. Zertal, who writes in his book *Am Nolah – Ha-Mizbeach be-Har Eival ve-Reshit Yisrael*, Tel Aviv 2000, p. 12: "For most of the biblical descriptions of the nation's origins there exists a real basis, both archaeological and topographical."

[7] To illustrate this point, we might note that Jerusalem – one of the main focuses of the controversy concerning the united kingdom, as we shall see – is proof of the limitations of archaeological findings. We lack archaeological artifacts from Jerusalem in the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., but among the Amarna Letters, seven letters from this period were discovered which were sent by Abdi-Khepa, the Canaanite king of Jerusalem, to the king of Egypt, testifying to the importance of the city (B. Mazar, "Jerusalem" in the *Encyclopedia Mikrait* III, Jerusalem 5718, columns 795-796.)

[8] This denotes a group of historians aligned with post-Zionism, including scholars such as Avi Shlaim, Benny Morris, Tom Segev and Ilan Pappé, who, since the 1980s, have sought to challenge the accepted version of Israeli and Zionist history.

[9] For a discussion of this phenomenon see Y. Elitzur, "*Al Ofnot be-Cheker Toldot Yisrael*," *Al Atar* 7 (above, n. 5), pp. 23-25.

[10] Z. Talshir, "*Matai Nikhtav ha-Tanakh*," *Beit Mikra* 49, 1 (above, n. 5), p. 18, notes the statement by T.L. Thompson, a leading minimalist scholar in Denmark, that "current

political developments indicate that an understanding of the heritage of Israel is extremely important not only for the academic community, but also for the community in general." She adds, "Against this background we understand why the history of Israel has recently been taken out of the framework of Bible research and introduced as part of the all-encompassing, inter-disciplinary regional reviews of Palestine. The overt point of departure is 'on behalf of' and 'for the sake of,' rather than on study of the history for its own sake."

<sup>[11]</sup> S. Japhet, "*Ha-Tanakh ve-ha-Historia*," in: *Ha-Pulmus al ha-Emet ha-Historit ba-Mikra*(above, n. 5), pp. 85-86.