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ARCHAEOLOGY: BIBLICAL ALLY OR ADVERSARY?

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SYNOPSIS

It is generally assumed that archaeological digs in the Near East usually confirm the biblical record. In recent years, however, various groups of radical revisionists have been claiming quite the opposite: excavations in Israel and elsewhere show that the early history of the Hebrews is very different from what is claimed in the Pentateuch and the rest of the Old Testament. Some of the more extreme critics, known as "biblical minimalists," even deny the historicity of Abraham and the patriarchs, the Israelite sojourn in Egypt, the Exodus, and Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land. They further question whether David and Solomon ever existed, at least as the powerful sovereigns described in the Old Testament.

Archaeological excavations across the past 150 years, however, have yielded more than enough results to demonstrate that such revisionism is vastly overdone and sensationalistic. The product of such shoddy methodology, in fact, relies too heavily on arguments from silence or absence. Again and again, what has been found in the ground has meshed remarkably well with what is claimed in the Old Testament, and truth is not served when radical revisionist critics ignore or misinterpret irrefutable evidence. They claim that they currently stand at the forefront of biblical research, but quite the opposite is the case, and many, if not most, leading archaeologists and biblical scholars reject their extreme conclusions. The spade remains the Bible's best friend.

Christian organizations often funded early excavations in the Near East, and the portrait of a faith-filled archaeologist marching off to his dig with the Bible in one hand and a spade in the other was quite familiar. Archaeological greats such as William Foxwell Albright virtually invented the discipline called "biblical archaeology," so assured were they that "the stones" would indeed "cry out" the truth of Scripture.

A series of stunning archaeological discoveries that directly corroborated places, personalities, and events in the Old and New Testaments only confirmed the general impression that biblical records were historically reliable. Journals such as *Biblical Archaeology Review* (BAR) and *Bible and Spade* implied as much in their titles.

Over the past decade, however, a strong countercurrent has developed among some scholars of the Near East who claim quite the opposite. A group often styled as "biblical minimalists" sees little or no correlation between archaeological and biblical evidence and thus no reliable history in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament). Leading spokesmen among the minimalists are Thomas L. Thompson and Niels P. Lemche of the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, with like-minded, postmodernist colleagues in both the East and the West.

In 2001, Israel Finkelstein, a revisionist archaeologist with similar views, along with Neal A. Silberman, penned a widely read book: *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*.¹ This "new vision" controverted traditional Jewish and Christian views of both the historical reliability of the Hebrew Bible and how it came to be. An even more popular vetting of this "vision" was a much-discussed article written by Daniel Lazare in the March 1, 2002, issue of *Harper's*. One-sided, trenchant, and biased to the extreme, the article follows a sensationalist title that says it all: "False Testament: Archaeology Refutes the Bible's Claim to History."² *Harper's* has a proud history going back to Abraham Lincoln's time, thus lending credibility to its contents. As a result, many more conservative Jewish and Christian readers are now alarmed that the very foundations of their faith are called into question, and this crisis of faith has been exacerbated by a Torah and commentary (*Etaz Hayim*) recently published by the United States Synagogue of Conservative Judaism that incorporates these revisionist views.

This (*nonsensationalist*) article will examine the claims made by Lazare and other revisionist critics, weigh them against the results of mainstream biblical archaeology and scholarship, and then describe how they are decisively wanting in both substance and methodology.

ASSAULT ON THE OLD TESTAMENT

The new criticism of the scriptural record is corrosive and categorical from beginning to end. It claims, for example, that there is no evidence that any such person as Abraham ever lived or even *could* have lived in its new version of ancient Israelite origins. There was no migration from Mesopotamia to any "Promised Land." Stories about the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it argues, were cobbled together out of various bits of early local lore. Moses was no more historically real than Abraham, for there was no Israelite sojourn in Egypt and the Exodus was a fiction; nor did Joshua conquer the "Promised Land," since the ancient Israelites were an indigenous culture already living in that land.

What about the monarchs Saul, David, and Solomon and their regional empires? Surely they were historical, weren't they? No. According to this revisionism, Jerusalem priests in the eighth and seventh centuries BC probably invented them. In the words of Lazare, if David *is* historical, he was

not a mighty potentate whose power was felt from the Nile to the Euphrates but rather a freebooter who carved out what was at most a small duchy in the southern highlands around Jerusalem and Hebron. Indeed, the chief disagreement among scholars nowadays is between those who hold that David was a petty hilltop chieftain whose writ extended no more than a few miles in any direction and a small but vociferous band of "biblical minimalists" who maintain that he never existed at all.³

There never was a united Hebrew monarchy in this overcritical view, and, according to Finkelstein, the architectural accomplishments of David and Solomon should rather be ascribed to King Ahab of Israel. As for religious beliefs, monotheistic Judaism was itself a late development — again in contrast to biblical evidence — when also the heroic stories of the patriarchs and judges were crafted to show that Israel owned the land by rite of conquest. Probably not until we reach King Hezekiah in the eighth century BC do the extreme critics begin to grant historicity to the Old Testament narratives.

This attack on Old Testament Scripture is of a full-fledged, no-holds-barred variety. Such extreme views invite dismissal of this assault as the work of a cadre of sensation-seeking quasischolars whose radical revisionism almost guarantees attention in the media. This has been a trail well blazed, after all, by members of the so-called Jesus Seminar and their notorious votes on whether Jesus could have said or done something credited to Him in the Gospels. The more radical biblical minimalists certainly engage in sensationalism, but the balance of such scholars base their case almost entirely on what they deem to be the *absence* of archaeological evidence that corroborates material in the earlier eras of the Old Testament. Because their contentions are supposedly based on academic scholarship, we must now examine their allegations more closely.

False Claims

Abraham a Myth? Early critics in the 1800s denied the existence of Abraham's hometown, Ur of the Chaldees (Gen. 11:31). This continued until Sir Leonard Woolley's systematic excavations from 1922–34

uncovered the immense ziggurat or temple tower at Ur near the mouth of the Euphrates in Mesopotamia. The name “Abraham” appears in Mesopotamian records, and the various nationalities the patriarch encountered, as recorded in Genesis, are entirely consistent with the peoples known at that time and place. Other details in the biblical account regarding Abraham, such as the treaties he made with neighboring rulers and even the price of slaves, mesh well with what is known elsewhere in the history of the ancient Near East.⁴

No Migration from Mesopotamia? Semitic tribes of the time were continually moving into and out of Mesopotamia. In fact, Abraham’s recorded trek into the Promised Land along a route up the Euphrates valley to Haran in southern Anatolia, which has also been identified and excavated, and then down through Syria to Canaan is geographically accurate. Using that Fertile Crescent route was the only way to travel successfully from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in those days.

The Patriarchs? Nothing in the Genesis account contradicts the nomadic way of life, replete with flocks and herds, that was characteristic of life in the nineteenth or eighteenth centuries BC. The agreements and contracts of the time, such as finding a bride from members of the same tribe and other customs, are well known elsewhere in the ancient Near East. To argue that the patriarchs did not exist because their names have not been found archaeologically is merely an argument from silence — the weakest form of argumentation that can be used. As fair-minded historians put it, “Absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.”

No Israelite Sojourn in Egypt or Exodus Therefrom? Critics make much of the supposed “fact” that there is no mention of the Hebrews in hieroglyphic inscriptions, no mention of Moses, and no records of such a mass population movement as claimed in the biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt. This “fact” is questionable. The famous Israel Stele (an inscribed stone or slab) of Pharaoh Merneptah (described more fully below) states, “Israel — his seed is not.” Furthermore, even if there were no mention whatever of the Hebrews in Egyptian records, this also would prove nothing, especially in view of the well-known Egyptian proclivity *never* to record reverses or defeats or anything that would embarrass the majesty of the ruling monarch. Would any pharaoh have the following words chiseled onto his monument: “Under my administration, a great horde of Hebrew slaves successfully escaped into the Sinai Desert when we tried to prevent them”?

The ancient Egyptians, in fact, transformed some of their reverses into “victories.” One of the most imposing monuments in Egypt consists of four-seated colossi of Rameses II overlooking the Nile (now Lake Nasser) at Abu-Simbel. Rameses erected the colossi to intimidate the Ethiopians to the south who had heard correctly that he had barely escaped with his life at the battle of Kadesh against the Hittites, and so they thought Egypt was ripe for invasion. The story told on the walls inside this monument, however, was that of a marvelous Egyptian victory!

No Moses? The very name *Moses* is Egyptian, as witness pharaonic names such as Thut-*mose* and Ra-*meses*. The ambient life as described in Genesis and Exodus is entirely consonant with what we know of ancient Egypt in the Hyksos and Empire periods: the food, the feasts, everyday life, customs, the names of locations, the local deities, and the like are familiar in both Hebrew and Egyptian literature.⁵

No Exodus? It is true that few remains of encampments or artifacts from the Exodus era have been discovered archaeologically in the Sinai, but a nomadic, tribal migration would hardly leave behind permanent stone foundations of imposing buildings en route. Hardly any archaeology is taking place in the Sinai, and if this changes, evidence of migration may very well be uncovered. Again, beware of the argument from silence.

No Conquest of Canaan by Joshua? The “Battle of Jericho” continues to be fought! When Dame Kathleen Kenyon excavated at Jericho in the 1950s, she claimed not to have found any collapsed walls or even evidence of a living city at Jericho during the time of Joshua’s invasion — nothing for him to conquer. She did, indeed, find an *earlier*, heavily fortified Jericho that c. 1550 BC was subject to a violent conquest with fallen walls and a burnt ash layer a yard thick, indicating destruction by fire. That, in her view, was before Joshua and the Israelites arrived.⁶ Critics immediately seized on her interpretation as solid evidence that Joshua’s conquest of Jericho must have been folklore.

Archaeologist Bryant G. Wood, however, editor of *Bible and Spade*, found that Kenyon had misdated her finds and that the destruction of Jericho actually took place in the 1400s BC when Joshua was very much on the scene, according to earlier (1400 rather than 1200 BC) datings of the Israelite invasion. In a brilliant 1990 article in *BAR*, Wood based his chronology on stratigraphy, pottery types, carbon-14 datings, and other evidence, including collapsed walls, to show a rather surprising archaeological confirmation of the biblical detail recorded in Judges 6 and following.⁷

Kings David and Solomon Barely Historical or Even Mythical? The critics again rely much too heavily on the argument from silence or absence. They contend that for all the wealth and grandeur of the reigns of David and Solomon, some of the golden goblets and other luxurious items from their palaces should have come to light in the excavations, but they have not. Lazare complains, “Yet not one goblet, not one brick, has ever been found to indicate that such a reign existed. If David and Solomon had been important regional power brokers, one might reasonably expect their names to crop up on monuments and in the diplomatic correspondence of the day. Yet once again the record is silent.”⁸

This contention, however, is hopelessly flawed because of one simple fact: Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt some 15 to 20 times since the days of David and Solomon, and each conquest took its toll on valuable artifacts. What, moreover, did Belshazzar set out as tableware for his famous feast in Babylon (Dan. 5:2–3)? Gold and silver cups that Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from the Temple in Jerusalem!

As for David’s name itself, the record is no longer silent. In 1993, archaeologist Avraham Biran, digging at Tel Dan in northern Israel, discovered a victory stele in three stone chunks on which David’s name is inscribed, the first archaeological reference to David outside of the Old Testament. The Aramaic inscription contains a boast by the king of Damascus (probably Hazael) that he had defeated the king of Israel (probably Joram, son of Ahab) and the king of “the house of David” (probably Ahaziah, son of Jehoram, c. 842 BC).⁹

This discovery alone should have quieted minimalist claims that there was no David, but never underestimate the rigidity of minds locked onto a course of revisionism. They are still desperately trying to retranslate the message on the stele or even claim that the name David is a forgery — folly compounding folly!

King Ahab of Israel As the Master Builder of the Temple Rather than David and Solomon? This is a favorite conclusion of archaeologist Finkelstein, but his archaeological time grid differs from the standard model by some 150 years, which is — not surprisingly — precisely the difference between David at 1000 BC and Ahab at 850 BC.

One is also struck by the sudden silence of the revisionist critics concerning the record from about the time of King Hezekiah (fl. 700 BC) on. At that point, evidently, the Old Testament instantly becomes “more historical” for them. This concession, of course, is forced on them because of the overwhelming number of correlations from archaeology, records of surrounding nations, and ancient history in general that fully corroborate the biblical evidence. The Assyrians did not conquer mythical northern Israelites in 722 BC, nor did Nebuchadnezzar deport into the Babylonian captivity a legendary, folkloric band of Jews who never existed. We leave it to the critics to explain how fact suddenly emerges out of supposed fantasy in the Old Testament.

Wrong Methodology

In dealing with specifics such as the above, the errors in content, procedure, and even logic employed by the revisionist critics are apparent and might be listed as follows:

1. Overusing arguments from silence or absence of archaeological evidence. Such arguments have often been rendered moot by subsequent discoveries that provide such “missing” evidence.
2. Assuming that archaeology can tell us more than is warranted by the finds. Archaeology is not the only source of evidence, for it must also be supplemented by relevant data from both sacred and secular history.

3. Assuming that archaeology is dispassionate and objective, when, in fact, some excavators are quite the opposite; unfortunately, recent political pressures have also impinged on the discipline.
4. Assuming that there is agreement among archaeologists as to time grids involving uncovered strata and the artifacts therein. In fact, their interpretations of excavated evidence often differ widely.
5. Suggesting that revisionist criticism represents the latest and best scholarly and archaeological research on biblical origins today. In sober fact, recent issues of journals such as BAR and Bible and Spade are crammed with criticism of the minimalist position, and the debate between traditional and radical views among biblical scholars continues to rage.
6. Condoning reports, such as Lazare's in Harper's, that are so hopelessly one-sided that bias screams out in every other paragraph.
7. Opting for sensation rather than sense, as is the case with extremists in any discipline.
8. Using results very selectively rather than accounting for all the evidence. Failure to evaluate evidence on the "other side" or even misrepresenting it results in torque, not truth.

This is not to claim that there are no problems in the Old Testament record; even traditionalists will admit that there certainly are. We can all fondly wish that the author of Genesis had given us the names of more contemporary associates of Abraham so that the whole patriarchal era could be dated with more precision; and why, oh, why, don't we have the actual names of the Egyptian kings involved in the Oppression and the Exodus rather than only their generic title, "pharaoh"? Later on, the Old Testament readily gives us the proper names of pharaohs such as Shishak (fl. 920 BC, 1 Kings 14:25 f.) and Necho (fl. 600 BC, 2 Kings 23:29 ff.). Had such individual names appeared in Exodus, we would have been spared hundreds of tomes and thousands of articles debating their identity. We all crave, moreover, far more specific detail about the Hebrews in the period pre-1000 BC and would likely sacrifice several chapters of Jewish ceremonial law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy in exchange for this description.

Perhaps, though, we are asking too much of early sacred records. No religion or culture on earth has, in fact, *more specificity* in its earliest historical records than the Torah, and it is always the case that the earliest records of any peoples will be more spotty and compressed than the later ones. We certainly see in the Old and New Testaments, not a progressive historicity in the sense that the earlier records are not historical and the later records are — as the radical revisionists claim — but rather a *progressive historical specificity*.

THE FACTUAL EVIDENCE

Archaeological finds that contradict the contentions of biblical minimalists and other revisionists have been listed above. There are many more, however, that corroborate biblical evidence, and the following list provides only the most significant discoveries:

A Common Flood Story. Not just the Hebrews (Gen. 6–8), but Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Greeks all report a flood in primordial times. A Sumerian king list from c. 2100 BC divides itself into two categories: those kings who ruled before a great flood and those who ruled after it. One of the earliest examples of Sumero-Akkadian-Babylonian literature, the Gilgamesh Epic, describes a great flood sent as punishment by the gods, with humanity saved only when the pious Utnapishtim (AKA, "the Mesopotamian Noah") builds a ship and saves the animal world thereon. A later Greek counterpart, the story of Deucalion and Phyrre, tells of a couple who survived a great flood sent by an angry Zeus. Taking refuge atop Mount Parnassus (AKA, "the Greek Ararat"), they supposedly repopulated the earth by heaving stones behind them that sprang into human beings.

The Code of Hammurabi. This seven-foot black diorite stele, discovered at Susa and presently located in the Louvre museum, contains 282 engraved laws of Babylonian King Hammurabi (fl. 1750 BC). The common basis for this law code is the *lex talionis* ("the law of the tooth"), showing that there was a common Semitic law of retribution in the ancient Near East, which is clearly reflected in the Pentateuch. Exodus 21:23–25, for example, reads: "But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot..." (NIV).

The Nuzi Tablets. The some 20,000 cuneiform clay tablets discovered at the ruins of Nuzi, east of the Tigris River and datable to c. 1500 BC, reveal institutions, practices, and customs remarkably congruent to those found in Genesis. These tablets include treaties, marriage arrangements, rules regarding inheritance, adoption, and the like.

The Existence of Hittites. Genesis 23 reports that Abraham buried Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah, which he purchased from Ephron the Hittite. Second Samuel 11 tells of David's adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. A century ago the Hittites were unknown outside of the Old Testament, and critics claimed that they were a figment of biblical imagination. In 1906, however, archaeologists digging east of Ankara, Turkey, discovered the ruins of Hattusas, the ancient Hittite capital at what is today called Boghazkoy, as well as its vast collection of Hittite historical records, which showed an empire flourishing in the mid-second millennium BC. This critical challenge, among many others, was immediately proved worthless — a pattern that would often be repeated in the decades to come.

The Merneptah Stele. A seven-foot slab engraved with hieroglyphics, also called the Israel Stele, boasts of the Egyptian pharaoh's conquest of Libyans and peoples in Palestine, including the Israelites: "Israel — his seed is not." This is the earliest reference to Israel in nonbiblical sources and demonstrates that, as of c. 1230 BC, the Hebrews were already living in the Promised Land.

Biblical Cities Attested Archaeologically. In addition to Jericho, places such as Haran, Hazor, Dan, Megiddo, Shechem, Samaria, Shiloh, Gezer, Gibeah, Beth Shemesh, Beth Shean, Beersheba, Lachish, and many other urban sites have been excavated, quite apart from such larger and obvious locations as Jerusalem or Babylon. Such geographical markers are extremely significant in demonstrating that *fact*, not *fantasy*, is intended in the Old Testament historical narratives; otherwise, the specificity regarding these urban sites would have been replaced by "Once upon a time" narratives with only hazy geographical parameters, if any.

Israel's enemies in the Hebrew Bible likewise are not contrived but solidly historical. Among the most dangerous of these were the Philistines, the people after whom Palestine itself would be named. Their earliest depiction is on the Temple of Rameses III at Thebes, c. 1150 BC, as "peoples of the sea" who invaded the Delta area and later the coastal plain of Canaan. The Pentapolis (five cities) they established — namely Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron — have all been excavated, at least in part, and some remain cities to this day. Such precise urban evidence measures favorably when compared with the geographical sites *claimed* in the holy books of other religious systems, which often have no basis whatever in reality.¹⁰

Shishak's Invasion of Judah. First Kings 14 and 2 Chronicles 12 tell of Pharaoh Shishak's conquest of Judah in the fifth year of the reign of King Rehoboam, the brainless son of Solomon, and how Solomon's temple in Jerusalem was robbed of its treasures on that occasion. This victory is also commemorated in hieroglyphic wall carvings on the Temple of Amon at Thebes.

The Moabite Stone. Second Kings 3 reports that Mesha, the king of Moab, rebelled against the king of Israel following the death of Ahab. A three-foot stone slab, also called the Mesha Stele, confirms the revolt by claiming triumph over Ahab's family, c. 850 BC, and that Israel had "perished forever."

Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. In 2 Kings 9–10, Jehu is mentioned as King of Israel (841–814 BC). That the growing power of Assyria was already encroaching on the northern kings prior to their ultimate conquest in 722 BC is demonstrated by a six-and-a-half-foot black obelisk discovered in the ruins of the palace at Nimrud in 1846. On it, Jehu is shown kneeling before Shalmaneser III and offering tribute to the Assyrian king, the only relief we have to date of a Hebrew monarch.

Burial Plaque of King Uzziah. Down in Judah, King Uzziah ruled from 792 to 740 BC, a contemporary of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. Like Solomon, he began well and ended badly. In 2 Chronicles 26 his sin is recorded, which resulted in his being struck with leprosy later in life. When Uzziah died, he was interred in a "field of burial that belonged to the kings." His stone burial plaque has been discovered on the Mount of Olives, and it reads: "Here, the bones of Uzziah, King of Judah, were brought. Do not open."

Hezekiah's Siloam Tunnel Inscription. King Hezekiah of Judah ruled from 721 to 686 BC. Fearing a siege by the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, Hezekiah preserved Jerusalem's water supply by cutting a tunnel through 1,750 feet of solid rock from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam inside the city walls (2 Kings 20; 2 Chron. 32). At the Siloam end of the tunnel, an inscription, presently in the archaeological museum at Istanbul, Turkey, celebrates this remarkable accomplishment. The tunnel is probably the only biblical site that has not changed its appearance in 2,700 years.

The Sennacherib Prism. After having conquered the 10 northern tribes of Israel, the Assyrians moved southward to do the same to Judah (2 Kings 18–19). The prophet Isaiah, however, told Hezekiah that God would protect Judah and Jerusalem against Sennacherib (2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36–37). Assyrian records virtually confirm this. The cuneiform on a hexagonal, 15-inch baked clay prism found at the Assyrian capital of Nineveh describes Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BC in which it claims that the Assyrian king shut Hezekiah inside Jerusalem "like a caged bird." Like the biblical record, however, it does *not* state that he conquered Jerusalem, which the prism certainly would have done had this been the case. The Assyrians, in fact, bypassed Jerusalem on their way to Egypt, and the city would not fall until the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonians in 586 BC. Sennacherib himself returned to Nineveh where his own sons murdered him.

The Cylinder of Cyrus the Great. Second Chronicles 36:23 and Ezra 1 report that Cyrus the Great of Persia, after conquering Babylon, permitted Jews in the Babylonian Captivity to return to their homeland. Isaiah had even prophesied this (Isa. 44:28). This tolerant policy of the founder of the Persian Empire is borne out by the discovery of a nine-inch clay cylinder found at Babylon from the time of its conquest, 539 BC, which reports Cyrus's victory and his subsequent policy of permitting Babylonian captives to return to their homes and even rebuild their temples.

So it goes. This list of correlations between Old Testament texts and the hard evidence of Near Eastern archaeology could easily be tripled in length. When it comes to the intertestamental and New Testament eras, as we might expect, the needle on the gauge of positive correlations simply goes off the scale.

To use terms such as "false testament" for the Hebrew Bible and to vaporize its earlier personalities into nonexistence accordingly has no justification whatever in terms of the mass of geographical, archaeological, and historical evidence that correlates so admirably with Scripture.

LET'S REVISE THE REVISIONISM

In view of the overwhelming evidence, to banner an article in Harper's as "False Testament" when referring to the Hebrew Bible is clearly an outrage. A cartoon in that article, showing the Bible being eaten away with vast corridors cut through its text, is an appropriately false caricature that goes with the rest of the article.

This, however, is quite typical of the way biblical matters are reported in today's news media. An extraordinary archaeological discovery that confirms the biblical record barely receives any notice in the press, as witness the bones of the first biblical personality ever discovered in November, 1990. Generally, only one in a hundred know that the remains of Joseph Caiaphas, the high priest who indicted Jesus before Pontius Pilate on Good Friday, were found at that time in an ossuary in the Peace Forest of Jerusalem south of the Temple area. Let sensation-seeking writers claim, however, that the patriarchs were mythical, that David was a petty hilltop chieftain if he existed at all, that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, or that God predicted the assassination of Israeli premier Itzhaak Rabin through some arcane Bible code (yet did nothing about it), and the press covers it sympathetically and in full. In no way is this fair, ethical, or even logical.

Nor is the press alone in this deception. Radical revisionist biblical scholars and pseudoscholars, like members of the notorious Jesus Seminar, are well aware of this sad sensationalizing formula for success and exploit it regularly. This may, admittedly, be impugning the motives of some in that category who are driven instead by a desire merely to be "politically correct" when it comes to biblical scholarship; that is, to be ultracritical of anything biblical. In this connection, sadly, secular historians of the ancient world

often have a much higher opinion of the reliability of biblical sources than some biblical scholars themselves!

Lest this critique be written off as the meaningless chatter of some conservative curmudgeon, however, I must point out that, in fact, it represents the majority view in biblical scholarship today. University of Arizona archaeologist William Dever, for example, is well known for his objection to the term “biblical archaeology,” since it seems to convey a probiblical bias; yet he assails some of the unwarranted conclusions of biblical minimalists in a strongly worded article in BAR: “Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey.”¹¹ He does not have kind words for the minimalists in his book, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* either. “I suggest,” he writes, “that the revisionists are nihilist not only in the historical sense but also in the philosophical and moral sense.”¹²

BAR, which provides the literary arena for the traditionalist vs. minimalist battles and tries to keep a neutral stance in the process, similarly found the Harper’s article to be “only one side of a very hot debate in the field. Nowhere does [the author] try to evaluate the merits of the other side’s case. In fact he gives no indication that he’s even aware there is another side.”¹³

Let the debate continue, but let all the evidence be admitted. Ever since scientific archaeology started a century and a half ago, the consistent pattern has been this: the hard evidence from the ground has borne out the biblical record again and again — and again. The Bible has nothing to fear from the spade.

NOTES

1. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).
2. Daniel Lazare, “False Testament: Archaeology Refutes the Bible’s Claim to History,” *Harper’s*, March 2002, 39–47.
3. *Ibid.*, 40.
4. See Kenneth Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (hereafter *BAR*), March/April 1995, 48ff.
5. A considerable, and growing, body of literature exists on the Hebrews in Egypt, the role of Joseph, the pharaoh who befriended him, the Hyksos, the pharaoh of the Oppression, the pharaoh of the Exodus, and the Exodus itself. See recent issues of *Bible and Spade*, especially no. 16 (Winter 2003). Joseph P. Free and Howard F. Vos, *Archaeology and Bible History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 69–105 is also helpful, as is Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999).
6. Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Digging up Jericho* (London: Ernest Benn, 1957); *Excavations at Jericho*, vol. 3 (London: British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1981).
7. Bryant G. Wood, “Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho?” *BAR*, March/April 1990, 44–58.
8. Lazare, 45–46.
9. Hershel Shanks, “Biran at Ninety,” *BAR*, September/October 1999, 44.
10. For example, in *The Book of Mormon*, proper names of places and people have no substantiation from outside sources.
11. William A. Dever, “Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey,” *BAR*, March/April 2000, 28.
12. William A. Dever, cited in Gordon Govier, “Biblical Archaeology’s Dusty Little Secret,” *Christianity Today*, October 2003, 38.
13. Steven Feldman, “Is the Bible a Bunch of Historical Hooey?” *BAR*, May/June 2002, 6.