ANCIENT WORLDS

Archeology of the Hebrew Bible

William Dever, Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona, has investigated the archeology of the ancient Near East for more than 30 years and authored almost as many books on the subject. In the following interview, Dever describes some of the most significant archeological finds related to the Hebrew Bible, including his own hot-button discovery that the Israelites' God was linked to a female goddess called Asherah.

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Thousands of clay figurines like this one suggest that the early Israelites worshipped more than a single God.
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Proving the Bible

NOVA: Have biblical archeologists traditionally tried to find evidence that events in the Bible really happened?

William Dever: From the beginnings of what we call biblical archeology, perhaps 150 years ago, scholars, mostly western scholars, have attempted to use archeological data to prove the Bible. And for a long time it was thought to work. [William Foxwell] Albright, the great father of our discipline, often spoke of the "archeological revolution." Well, the revolution has come but not in the way that Albright thought. The truth of the matter today is that archeology raises more questions about the historicity of the Hebrew Bible and even the New Testament than it provides answers, and that's very disturbing to some people.

But perhaps we were asking the wrong questions. I have always thought that if we resurrected someone from the past, one of the biblical writers, they would be amused, because for them it would have made no difference. I think they would have said, faith is faith is faith—take your proofs and go with them.

The fact is that archeology can never prove any of the theological suppositions of the Bible. Archeologists can often tell you what happened and when and where and how and even why. No archeologists can tell anyone what it means, and most of us don't try.

Yet many people want to know whether the events of the Bible are real, historic events.

We want to make the Bible history. Many people think it has to be history or nothing. But there is no word for history in the Hebrew Bible. In other words, what did the biblical writers think they were doing? Writing objective history? No. That's a modern discipline. They were telling stories. They wanted you to know what these purported events mean.

The Bible is didactic literature; it wants to teach, not just to describe. We try to make the Bible something it is not, and that's doing an injustice to the biblical writers. They were good historians, and they could tell it the way it was when they wanted to, but their objective was always something far beyond that.

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WHO WERE THE VIKINGS?

When the field of biblical archeology began, its practitioners set out to prove that events of the Bible truly occurred.
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I like to point out to my undergraduate students that the Bible is not history; it's *his* story —Yahweh's story, God's story. [Yahweh is an ancient Israelite name for God.]

Even if archeology can't prove events of the Bible, can it enhance our understanding of the Bible?

Archeology is almost the only way that we have for reconstructing a real-life context for the world out of which the Bible came, and that does bring understanding. When you think of how little we knew about the biblical world even 100 years ago and what we know today, it's astonishing.

The faith of Abraham

According to the Bible, the first person to form a covenant with God is Abraham. He is the great patriarch. Is there archeological evidence for Abraham?

One of the first efforts of biblical archeology in the last century was to prove the historicity of the patriarchs, to locate them in a particular period in the archeological history. Today I think most archeologists would argue that there is no direct archeological proof that Abraham, for instance, ever lived. We do know a lot about pastoral nomads, we know about the Amorites' migrations from Mesopotamia to Canaan, and it's possible to see in that an Abraham-like figure somewhere around 1800 B.C.E. But there's no direct connection.

> *"It disturbs some people that, for the very early periods, we archeologists haven't much to say."*

Are we to become unbelievers if we can't prove that Abraham ever lived? What is the story about? It's a story about freedom and faith and risk. Does it matter exactly how Abraham and his clan left, and when they arrived in Canaan, or where they settled? What really matters is that Abraham is seen later by Jews and Christians as the father of the faithful.

Abraham moves out on faith to a land he has never seen. You have to think of how perilous the journey would have been had it really taken place. We are talking about a journey of several hundred miles around the fringes of the desert. So it's an astonishing story. Is it true? It is profoundly true, but it's not the kind of truth that archeology can directly illuminate.

Why is it difficult for archeologists to find support for the accounts of the patriarchs?

It disturbs some people that, for the very early periods such as the so-called patriarchal period, we archeologists haven't much to say. The later we come in time, the firmer the ground we stand on—we have better sources. We have more written sources. We have more contemporary eyewitness sources.

For the earlier periods, we don't have any texts. Abraham might have lived around 1800 B.C.E. This is the dawn of written history or prehistory, when the archeological evidence can't easily be correlated with any external evidence, textual evidence—even if we did have it.

Evidence of the early Israelites

The Bible chronology puts Moses much later in time, around 1450 B.C.E. Is there archeological evidence for Moses and the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Israelites described in the Bible?

We have no direct archeological evidence. "Moses" is an Egyptian name. Some of the other names in the narratives are Egyptian, and there are genuine Egyptian elements. But no one has found a text or an artifact in Egypt itself or even in the Sinai that has any direct connection. That doesn't mean it didn't happen. But I think it does mean what happened was rather more modest. And the biblical writers have enlarged the story.

[For more on Moses and the Exodus, see Carol Meyer's interview.]

Is there mention of the Israelites anywhere in ancient Egyptian records?

No Egyptian text mentions the Israelites except the famous inscription of Merneptah dated to about 1206 B.C.E. But those Israelites were in Canaan; they are not in Egypt, and nothing is said about them escaping from Egypt.

The Merneptah Stele, dated to about 1206 B.C.E. and now housed at the Cairo Museum, offers the earliest historical evidence of a people called Israel.
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Tell us more about the Merneptah inscription. Why is it so famous?

It's the earliest reference we have to the Israelites. The victory stele of Pharaoh Merneptah, the son of Ramesses II, mentions a list of peoples and city-states in Canaan, and among them are the Israelites. And it's interesting that the other entities, the other ethnic groups, are described as nascent states, but the Israelites are described as "a people." They have not yet reached a level of state organization.

So the Egyptians, a little before 1200 B.C.E., know of a group of people somewhere in the central highlands—a loosely affiliated tribal confederation, if you will—called "Israelites." These are our Israelites. So this is a priceless inscription.

Does archeology back up the information in the Merneptah inscription? Is there evidence of the Israelites in the central highlands of Canaan at this time?

We know today, from archeological investigation, that there were more than 300 early villages of the 13th and 12th century in the area. I call these "proto-Israelite" villages.

Forty years ago it would have been impossible to identify the earliest Israelites archeologically. We just didn't have the evidence. And then, in a series of regional surveys, Israeli archeologists in the 1970s began to find small hilltop villages in the central hill country north and south of Jerusalem and in lower Galilee. Now we have almost 300 of them.

The origins of Israel

What have archeologists learned from these settlements about the early Israelites? Are there signs that the Israelites came in conquest, taking over the land from Canaanites?

The settlements were founded not on the ruins of destroyed Canaanite towns but rather on bedrock or on virgin soil. There was no evidence of armed conflict in most of these sites. Archeologists also have discovered that most of the large Canaanite towns that were supposedly destroyed by invading Israelites were either not destroyed at all or destroyed by "Sea People"—Philistines, or others.

So gradually the old conquest model [based on the accounts of Joshua's conquests in the Bible] began to lose favor amongst scholars. Many scholars now think that most of the early Israelites were originally Canaanites, displaced Canaanites, displaced from the lowlands, from the river valleys, displaced geographically and then displaced ideologically.

So what we are dealing with is a movement of peoples but not an invasion of an armed corps from the outside. A social and economic revolution, if you will, rather than a military revolution. And it begins a slow process in which the Israelites distinguish themselves from their Canaanite ancestors, particularly in religion—with a new deity, new religious laws and customs, new ethnic markers, as we would call them today.

> *"It's interesting that in these hundreds of 12th-century settlements there are no temples, no palaces, no elite residences."*

If the Bible's story of Joshua's conquest isn't entirely historic, what is its meaning?

Why was it told? Well, it was told because there were probably armed conflicts here and there, and these become a part of the story glorifying the career of Joshua, commander in chief of the Israelite forces. I suspect that there is a historical kernel, and there are a few sites that may well have been destroyed by these Israelites, such as Hazor in Galilee, or perhaps a site or two in the south.

Were the people who became Israelites in some sense not "the chosen people" but rather "the choosing people"—choosing to be free of their Canaanite past?

Some liberation theologians and some archeologists have argued that early Israel was a kind of revolutionary social movement. These were people rebelling against their corrupt Canaanite overlords. In my recent book on early Israel I characterize the Israelite movement as an agrarian social reform. These are pioneers in the hill country who are fleeing the urban centers, the old Canaanite cities, which are in a process of collapse. And in particular they are throwing off the yoke of their Canaanite and Egyptian overlords. They are declaring independence.

Now, why these people were willing to take such a risk, colonizing the hill country frontier, is very difficult to know. I think there were social and economic compulsions, but I would be the first to say I think it was probably also a new religious vision.

Compared to elaborately decorated imported pottery (top), the vessels of the early Israelites (bottom) appear humble—a sign, perhaps, of an egalitarian culture.
© WGBH Educational Foundation

Was this an egalitarian movement?

Some have argued that early Israel was an egalitarian society, that there was no social stratification. I'm not sure any society was ever really egalitarian, but there is a sort of egalitarianism in the Hebrew Bible: "Every man under his own fig tree, equal in the eyes of Yahweh." It's interesting that in these hundreds of 12th-century settlements there are no temples, no palaces, no elite residences, no monumental architecture of any kind. These are farming villages in which every household is independent. I think there is a kind of primitive democracy in early Israel, which is enshrined in the vision of the good life in the Hebrew Bible.

And these settlements grow, right?

Yes. These settlements are very different from the urban centers of the earlier 13th century. Something new is in the air, and I think this explains why other people join this movement. These villages will develop into the towns and the cities of the later state of Israel.

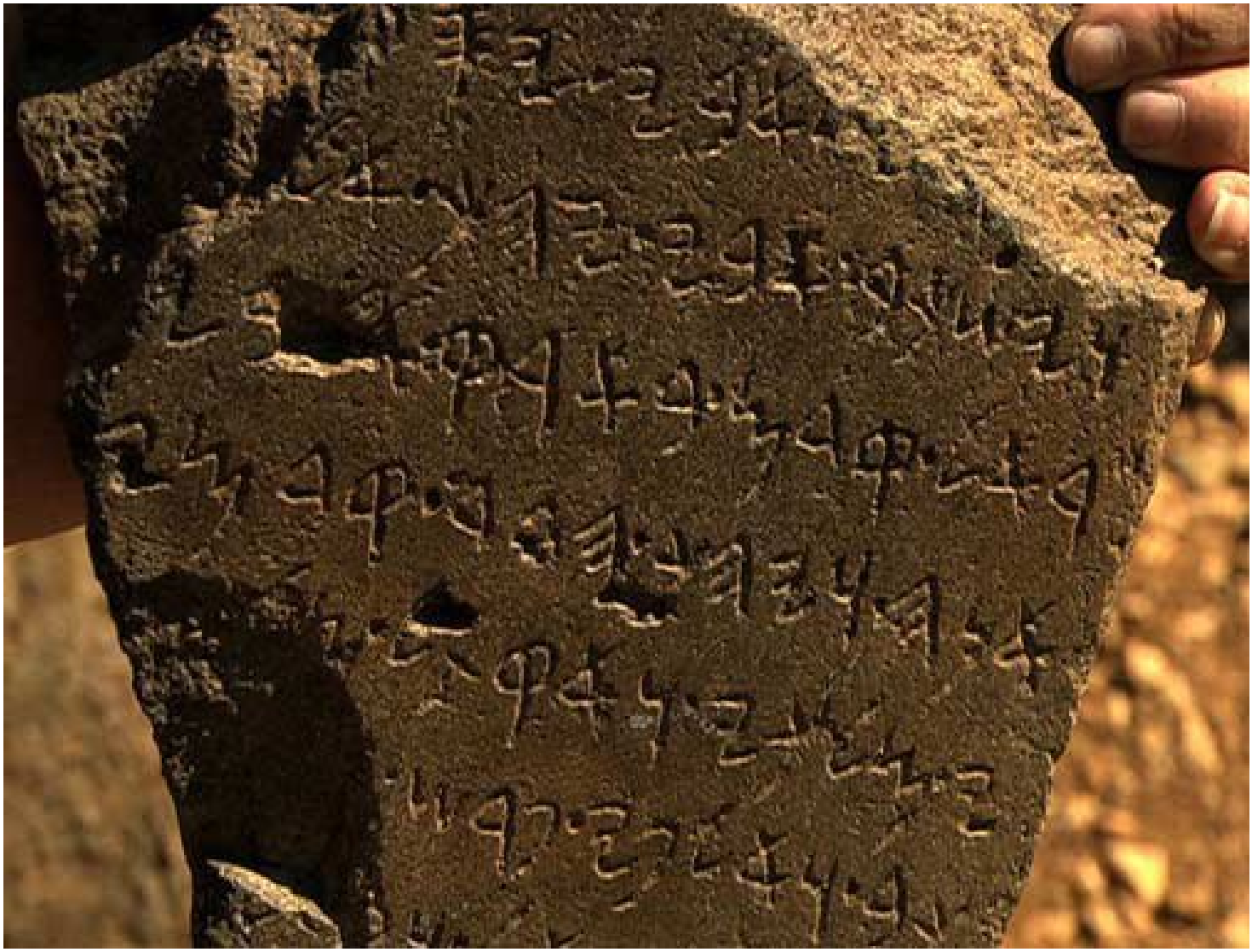
A United Monarchy

When did Israel become a state?

According to the biblical scheme of events, there was a United Monarchy for about a hundred years in the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon. Then a civil war brought about the division of the country into Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom. Now, some skeptics today have argued that there was no such thing as a United Monarchy. In short, there was no David.

However, in 1993 an inscription was found at Tel Dan. It mentions a dynasty of David.

And on the Mesha stone found in the last century in Moab there is also a probable reference to David. So there is textual evidence outside the Bible for these kings of the United Monarchy, at least David.



The inscription on a tablet found at Tel Dan, which dates to about 840 B.C.E., clearly mentions a "House of David."
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Most of us mainstream archeologists also have now dated a series of monumental royal constructions to the 10th century—the famous gates at Hazor and Megiddo and Gezer. And we have in the Bible, in First Kings 9:15-17, the famous description of Solomon's construction of gates of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. So I would argue for a 10th-century United Monarchy.

The Bible describes it as a glorious kingdom stretching from Egypt to Mesopotamia. Does archeology back up these descriptions?

The stories of Solomon are larger than life. According to the stories, Solomon imported 100,000 workers from what is now Lebanon. Well, the whole population of Israel probably wasn't 100,000 in the 10th century. Everything Solomon touched turned to gold. In the minds of the biblical writers, of course, David and Solomon are ideal kings chosen by Yahweh. So they glorify them.

Now, archeology can't either prove or disprove the stories. But I think most archeologists today would argue that the United Monarchy was not much more than a kind of hill-country chiefdom. It was very small-scale.

The Bible describes King Solomon's construction of massive gates in Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. Archeologists have uncovered the ruins of structures fitting these descriptions.
© Carta

Does archeology in Jerusalem itself reveal anything about the Kingdom of David and Solomon?

We haven't had much of an opportunity to excavate in Jerusalem. It's a living city, not an archeological site. But we have a growing collection of evidence—monumental buildings that most of us would date to the 10th century, including the new so-called Palace of David. Having seen it with the excavator, it is certainly monumental. Whether it's a palace or an administrative center or a combination of both or a kind of citadel remains to be seen.

[Hear the excavator herself, Eilat Mazar, describe the Palace of David.]

The Israelites' many gods

The Bible would have us think that all Israelites embraced monotheism relatively early, from Moses's time on. Is that contrary to what archeology has found?

The portrait of Israelite religion in the Hebrew Bible is the ideal, the ideal in the minds of those few who wrote the Bible—the elites, the Yahwists, the monotheists. But it's not the ideal for most people. And archeology deals with the ordinary, forgotten folk of ancient Israel who have no voice in the Bible. There is a wonderful phrase in Daniel Chapter 12: "For all those who sleep in the dust." Archeology brings them to light and allows them to speak. And most of them were not orthodox believers.

However, we should have guessed already that polytheism was the norm and not monotheism from the biblical denunciations of it. It was real and a threat as far as those who wrote the Bible were concerned. And today archeology has illuminated what we could call "folk religion" in an astonishing manner.

> *"The so-called folk religion even penetrated the Temple in Jerusalem."*

One of the astonishing things is your discovery of Yahweh's connection to Asherah. Tell us about that.

In 1968, I discovered an inscription in a cemetery west of Hebron, in the hill country, at the site of Khirbet el-Qôm, a Hebrew inscription of the 8th century B.C.E. It gives the name of the deceased, and it says "blessed may he be by Yahweh"—that's good biblical Hebrew—but it says "by Yahweh and his Asherah."

Asherah is the name of the old Canaanite Mother Goddess, the consort of El, the principal deity of the Canaanite pantheon. So why is a Hebrew inscription mentioning Yahweh in connection with the Canaanite Mother Goddess? Well, in popular religion they were a pair.

Dever says he nearly had a heart attack when he first read the inscription on this slab. It links the Israelite God, Yahweh, to the Canaanite Mother Goddess, Asherah.
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The Israelite prophets and reformers denounce the Mother Goddess and all the other gods and goddesses of Canaan. But I think Asherah was widely venerated in ancient Israel. If you look at Second Kings 23, which describes the reforms of King Josiah in the late 7th century, he talks about purging the Temple of all the cult paraphernalia of Asherah. So the so-called folk religion even penetrated the Temple in Jerusalem.

Is there other evidence linking Asherah to Yahweh?

In the 1970s, Israeli archeologists digging in Kuntillet Ajrud in the Sinai found a little desert fort of the same period, and lo and behold, we have "Yahweh and Asherah" all over the place in the Hebrew inscriptions.

Are there any images of Asherah?

For a hundred years now we have known of little terracotta female figurines. They show a nude female; the sexual organs are not represented but the breasts are. They are found in tombs, they are found in households, they are found everywhere. There are thousands of them. They date all the way from the 10th century to the early 6th century.

They have long been connected with one goddess or another, but many scholars are still hesitant to come to a conclusion. I think they are representations of Asherah, so I call them Asherah figurines.

There aren't such representations of Yahweh, are there?

No. Now, why is it that you could model the female deity but not the male deity? Well, I think the First and Second Commandments by now were taken pretty seriously. You just don't portray Yahweh, the male deity, but the Mother Goddess is okay. But his consort is probably a lesser deity.

We found molds for making Asherah figurines, mass-producing them, in village shrines. So probably almost everybody had one of these figurines, and they surely have something to do with fertility. They were no doubt used to pray for conceiving a child and bearing the child safely and nursing it. It's interesting to me that the Israelite and Judean ones are rather more modest than the Canaanite ones, which are right in your face. The Israelite and Judean ones mostly show a nursing mother.

Dever believes that these clay figurines, and thousands of others like them, represent Asherah.
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This has been something of a lightning rod, has it not?

This is awkward for some people, the notion that Israelite religion was not exclusively monotheistic. But we know now that it wasn't. Monotheism was a late development. Not until the Babylonian Exile and beyond does Israelite and Judean religion—Judaism—become monotheistic.

The improbable rise of Judaism

Does archeology have evidence of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians?

When it comes to destructions that might be illuminated by archeology, none would be more important than the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 B.C.E. by the Babylonians. Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of direct archeological evidence because we have never been able to excavate large areas in Jerusalem. The late Israeli archeologist Yigal Shiloh found a huge accumulation of debris on the east side of the Temple Mount, cascaded down the hill. So there is some evidence, not yet well-published. Of course, the Temple Mount has never been excavated and never will be.

That doesn't mean that that the destruction didn't take place and that it wasn't a watershed event. One would have thought at that time that it was the end of the people of Israel—with elites carried away into captivity and ordinary people impoverished. It would have seemed to have been the end, but it was rather the beginning. Because it was in exile, precisely, that those who wrote the Bible looked back, collected the archives they had, rethought it all, reformulated it, and out of that intellectual reconstruction comes early Judaism.

It seems astonishing that after this defeat the Israelites could stay faithful to their god.

In every age of disbelief, one is inclined to think that God is dead. And surely those who survived the fall of Jerusalem must have thought so. After all, how could God allow his Temple, his house—the visible sign of his presence amongst his people—to be destroyed? What did we do wrong? It's out of this that comes the reflection that polytheism was our downfall. There is, after all, only one God. And this radical belief in a single God who governs history becomes the heart of Judaism.

[Learn more about the Foundation of Judaism in this interview with Shaye Cohen.]

Editor's Notes

Editor's note: William Dever, like other academic scholars, uses the term B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) instead of B.C. (Before Christ).
This feature originally appeared on the site for the NOVA program "The Bible's Buried Secrets". See the original site for more related features.

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