LETTER FROM ISRAEL JUNE 29, 2020 ISSUE

IN SEARCH OF KING DAVID'S LOST EMPIRE

The Biblical ruler's story has been told for millennia. Archeologists are still fighting over whether it's true.

By Ruth Margalit

June 22, 2020

The evidence of David's life is sparse. Was he an emperor? A local king? Or, as Israel Finkelstein claims, a Bedouin sheikh? Illustration by Matteo Berton

Jerusalem, in the tenth century B.C., is an inhospitable place for farmers but a strategic location for men on the run. Human settlement in the Judean highlands is sparse: five thousand people, spread out in hamlets of about fifty families each. The landscape is rugged, veined with ravines and thicketed with oaks. Rain is unpredictable. To the east lies the desert, hushed and empty. To the west—teasingly close—are the lush lowlands of the Philistine city-states, with their seaside trade routes and their princely homes. Cut off from these coastal plains, life in the hill country is severe. Homes are made of unworked stone; sheep and goats are quartered indoors. There are no public buildings, no ornate furnishings in the shrines. Bands of fugitives, landless laborers, and tax evaders rove the Judean wilderness. These rebel gangs—viewed by the neighboring Egyptians as both a nuisance and a threat—maraud the nearby villages. They collect protection money and pillage the locals, making off with their women and their cattle. They terrorize the Philistines, and then, in a sudden turnaround, offer their services to a Philistine king in exchange for shelter.

Their leader is a wily, resourceful man from Bethlehem, who decides that his people are meant for more than lightning raids and mercenary stints. He sends his men to rout an advancing force, then shares the loot with the highland elders. This wins over the highlanders, and, in time, they make him chieftain of the southern hill area. He takes over the tribal center of Hebron, and later captures Jerusalem, another hilltop stronghold. The chieftain moves his extended family to the main homes of the Jerusalem village, and settles in one himself—a palace, some might call it, though there is nothing extravagant about it. He rules over a neglected chiefdom of pastoralists and outlaws. His name is David.

Israel Finkelstein's vision of King David—the vagabond, the racketeer—helped make his career as an eminent Biblical archeologist. But, when he began his research in the area, he was interested less in the Bible than in migration patterns. In 1993, Finkelstein was a newly tenured professor at Tel Aviv University, forty-four years old and known as something of an iconoclast. He was working on a

book called “Living on the Fringe,” which took up questions of human habitation in the ancient southern Levant—particularly Canaan, the site of what is now Israel. Finkelstein argued that the first settlers came there as a result of internal changes in the region; nomadic societies became sedentary for a few generations during periods of successful trade, then uprooted themselves, then settled again. The Israelites, he claimed, were “of local stock”—that is, Bedouin nomads.

The Bible, of course, tells it differently. In the Old Testament story, Canaan is where the Hebrews ended their exodus, and where David secured for his people a glorious kingdom. From about 1,000 B.C., he and his son Solomon ruled over a vast monarchy that encompassed four defeated kingdoms, stretching as far north as the Euphrates River and as far south as the Negev Desert. (Archeologists derive the date from an inscription on a portal gate in the Egyptian city of Karnak, which lists the military conquests of King Shoshenq—thought to be the same king mentioned in the Bible as Shishak.) The United Monarchy, as it is known, represented the golden age of ancient Israel; though it probably lasted no more than a generation or two, its legacy has persisted for thousands of years. For Jews, Finkelstein told me, David “represents territorial sovereignty, the legend of the empire.” For Christians, he is “directly related to Jesus and the birth of Christianity.” For Muslims, he is a righteous prophet who preceded Muhammad. The story of David, Finkelstein added, “is the most central thing in the Bible, and in our culture.”

The Bible depicts David as a brilliant but flawed figure, capable of unspeakable violence but also of remorse and tenderness—perhaps humanity’s first antihero. He is anointed by God to replace Saul, the first king of Israel, whose short rule was marked by bouts of rebellion. David is a handsome shepherd; he has a way with the lyre and a way with women; he slings a fatal stone at a giant. So far, these are the familiar tropes of the ancient hero. But David is also said to have impregnated Bathsheba —a married woman—and sent her husband off to die in battle.

Nadav Na’aman, an authority on Jewish history and a colleague of Finkelstein’s at Tel Aviv University, describes David’s story as “extraordinary fiction.” But he believes that it contains kernels of truth, preserved as the tale was passed down by oral tradition. The story, for instance, frequently mentions the Philistine city of Gath, which was destroyed in the late ninth century B.C.—a clue to its origins.

In the long war over how to reconcile the Bible with historical fact, the story of David stands at ground zero. There is no archeological record of Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob. There is no Noah’s Ark,

nothing from Moses. Joshua did not bring down the walls of Jericho: they collapsed centuries earlier, perhaps in an earthquake. But, in 1993, an Israeli archeologist working near the Syrian border found a fragment of basalt from the ninth century B.C., with an Aramaic inscription that mentioned the "House of David"—the first known reference to one of the Bible's foundational figures. So David is not just a central ancestor in the Old Testament. He may also be the only one that we can prove existed. Yet to prove it definitively would be exceptionally difficult; Jerusalem of the tenth century B.C. is an archeological void. "I can take a shoebox and put inside everything we have from that period," Yuval Gadot, an archeologist from Tel Aviv University, said.

Finkelstein has pushed Israeli research to the forefront of science, employing precision radiocarbon dating, DNA analysis, and image processing that can examine a three-thousand-year-old potsherd and determine how many ancient scribes were involved in its making. An archeology lab run by Tel Aviv University and the Weizmann Institute of Science has employed the chief forensic investigator of the Israel Police. Despite their advanced technology, these researchers are still engaged in questions that have persisted for more than a century. From where did the early Israelites emerge? When do we first see signs of a centralized cult with a single deity? More prosaically, but no less crucially, who was David? Was he the all-powerful king described in the Bible? Or was he, as some archeologists believe, no more than a small-time Bedouin sheikh?

William Albright, the father of Biblical archeology, seemed ill-suited to field work. Born in 1891, to Methodist missionaries from Iowa, Albright suffered from extreme myopia—likely the result of typhoid fever in infancy—and a left hand that had been mangled in a farming accident. At ten, though, he cobbled together enough money to buy a two-volume history of Babylon and Assyria. By sixteen, he was teaching himself Hebrew. In college, he studied Greek, Latin, Akkadian, Ancient Ethiopian, Syriac, and Arabic, with breaks to travel to New York for meetings of the American Oriental Society.

Albright was a faithful Christian, and the inerrancy of the Bible was then under attack. Critics, mostly in Europe, argued that the first five books of the Old Testament were written not at the time of Moses, as the Scriptures claim, but by authors working centuries apart, weaving a patchwork of tales from early Judeans and later priests, and even from Babylonian myths. For Albright, the Bible was

nevertheless a compendium of verifiable fact. In 1919, he arrived in Palestine, and began scouring the land of ancient Israel for findings that would illustrate and historicize the Scriptures.

In 1936, Albright named a successor in Palestine: Nelson Glueck, an American who is said to have boasted of digging "with a Bible in one hand and a trowel in the other." He surveyed hundreds of sites in Transjordan, and found evidence of an ancient copper industry so extensive that he nicknamed the area "the Pittsburgh of Palestine." By comparing potsherds he found there with those from other sites, Glueck grew convinced that the mines dated to the tenth century B.C. For Biblical archeologists, this was akin to striking gold—"the ultimate fantasy," one told me.

In the nascent State of Israel, there was real currency to research that could demonstrate the Jewish people's connection to their ancestral land—especially if it ignored the other people living there. David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister, said, "Jewish archeology present-tenses our past and shows our historic continuity in the country." His Army's legendary chief of staff, Yigael Yadin, became the country's leading archeologist. In 1955, Yadin began an epochal excavation of the ancient city of Hazor, which, in the Bible, is destroyed by Joshua during his conquest of Canaan, and later rebuilt and fortified by Solomon. Yadin approached the dig like a military operation. He employed two hundred diggers, mostly immigrants from North Africa, and installed a network of field telephones and a miniature railway for transferring dirt. His men unearthed a six-chambered gate made of ashlar stones, which looked identical to a gate that Yadin had previously discovered in Megiddo—another city thought to have been built by Solomon. Here was evidence of a grand design, Yadin concluded. "Both gates were built by the same royal architect," he wrote in 1958.

Finkelstein was nine years old at the time, and the romance of such finds was helping to inspire what one historian described as a "popular national cult" of archeology. The cult didn't extend to Finkelstein's house. He was raised outside Tel Aviv, in a family of citrus farmers. His father was a talented athlete and, he says, a "big macho," who emigrated from Ukraine, joined his in-laws' orchard business, and went on to become a successful sports executive. At age four, Finkelstein was considered a math prodigy. But, he said, "my parents did what you're not supposed to do, which is to show off my skills with a slide rule in front of guests." His father wanted him to be a nuclear physicist, and was baffled by his decision to go into archeology: "Until his last day, he couldn't understand why someone would pay me a salary—'Who cares? What good does it do?' "

After serving in the Israeli Air Force, Finkelstein landed, in 1970, in the archeology department at Tel Aviv. The field was embroiled in debate. "There was a world war going on over whether Abraham was historical," he said. "Then there was a big debate over the conquest of Canaan. Today, there isn't. We know these things didn't happen. But that's how it all went—the salami method." The most momentous events in the Scriptures were being pared away, one after another. Finkelstein found it easy to wonder whether any of the Biblical narrative was based on historical fact.

Thomas Römer, the head of the Collège de France, told me that Finkelstein developed "a reputation as one of the young generation who were about to challenge the traditional way of how Israel was doing archeology." He also developed a reputation as a playboy. "I needed to calm down in every respect" is how he puts it. He was married when he accepted a two-year teaching position in Chicago, in the mid-eighties, but the marriage collapsed soon after his return home. He met his second wife, Joëlle Cohen, a Parisian émigrée, on a dig in southern Israel. By then, he was forty—and calmer.

After years of researching the highlands, Finkelstein wanted to take on a site in the lowlands, to see whether social structures emerged differently there. He chose Megiddo, Yadin's old territory. It was the "switchboard of the Levant," Finkelstein told me one afternoon a few months ago. We were in his office in the Tel Aviv University humanities building. He had settled in a lime-green armchair, and gestured for me to sit on a wooden daybed. An electric bicycle, which he calls his "Mercedes," was parked in a corner. At seventy-one, Finkelstein is six feet two, bearded, with a deep baritone and elegant hands that always seem to be conducting an invisible orchestra. (I heard a janitor on campus address him as "Sean Connery.") He is generous, witty, courtly, overwhelmingly charming—and he knows it. "Israel Finkelstein is Israel Finkelstein's greatest fan," one scholar told me. More than once, when we spoke, he compared himself to Baruch Spinoza, "a great Jew," who, in 1656, was excommunicated for challenging Biblical orthodoxy. In conversation, Finkelstein often refers to himself as "your slave," "your loyal slave," or "your wretched slave," which has the strange effect of further elevating his self-image.

Finkelstein spent a year preparing for Megiddo, poring over stratigraphy and chronological charts. The more he read, the more confused he grew. Yadin had dated the site's most substantial layer to Solomonic times. But there was confounding evidence, in the form of relics from a long-collapsed palace. The relics were inscribed with stonemason marks strikingly similar to those from a palace in the ancient city of Samaria—which had been persuasively dated to a century *after* Solomon's rule. As

Finkelstein considered this, he visited a friend's dig in the Jezreel Valley, where excavators had noticed that the pottery—burnished by hand and painted red—was much like the ceramics of Megiddo. But his friend's site was from the time of the Omrides, who ruled Israel in the ninth century B.C. Again, Yadin's dating seemed to be off by a hundred years. "Something fundamentally didn't make sense," Finkelstein told me.

He began to think more broadly about ancient Israel in relation to its surroundings. For three centuries before the time of David, the pharaohs of Egypt's New Kingdom had ruled over Canaan. But, by the tenth century B.C., the Egyptian empire had long receded, diminished by a withering regional drought. The same drought had also vanquished the Hittite empire, of present-day Turkey, and the Mycenaean empire, of Greece. What were the chances that a single empire would suddenly appear on the world stage—and in the neglected highlands of Judah, of all places? "An empire needs a capital," Finkelstein has said. "There's almost nothing in Jerusalem; a very small village. An empire needs manpower. There's nothing in Judah; a few small villages. An empire needs administration. There's no administration. There's no scribal activity. Where is the empire?"

In 1996, Finkelstein published a paper in the peer-reviewed journal *Levant*, with a modest title, "The Archeology of the United Monarchy: An Alternative View." To the uninitiated, his argument was technical and narrow: the stratum at Megiddo that had yielded the palace and other monumental architecture should be down-dated to the ninth century B.C., as should comparable layers at other sites. In effect, however, Finkelstein was stripping David and Solomon's United Monarchy of any ruins attesting to splendor, and reattributing those ruins to the Omride kingdom of northern Israel. Omri is presented in the Bible as a marginal king—but, according to Finkelstein, that only underscores the authors' Judean bias. The archeological record suggests that Omri's kingdom was a dominant regional power, with the House of David serving as its vassal.

"The new dating calls for a re-evaluation of the historical, cultural and political processes that took place in Palestine in the eleventh-ninth centuries B.C.," Finkelstein wrote. A "re-evaluation," in other words, of the rise of ancient Israel. In a later addendum, he went further, accusing Yadin, who died in 1984, and his acolytes of being led astray by "irrelevant sentiments" regarding the "grandeur" of early Israel.

Finkelstein thought that he had settled the issue; the scholarly world would accept his theory, which came to be known as the "low chronology," and move on. "I was naïve," he told me. "I didn't know what kind of battle I was getting myself into."

Finkelstein's paper unleashed a torrent of academic rejoinders. His friend Amihai Mazar, a renowned professor of archeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, wrote that Finkelstein's conclusions were "premature and unacceptable." Amnon Ben-Tor, also of the Hebrew University, and long regarded as Yadin's successor, accused him of employing a "double standard": citing the Biblical text where it suited him and deploring its use where it did not.

In 1999, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published a front-page story about this controversial new frontier in archeology. Written by Ze'ev Herzog, a colleague of Finkelstein's, it was titled "The Bible: No Evidence on the Ground." Herzog wrote, "Following seventy years of intensive excavations in the Land of Israel, archeologists have found out: The patriarchs' acts are legendary, the Israelites did not sojourn in Egypt or make an exodus, they did not conquer the land. Neither is there any mention of the empire of David and Solomon, nor of the source of belief in the God of Israel. These facts have been known for years, but Israelis are a stubborn people, and no one wants to hear it."

For insiders, the *Haaretz* article read like a long subtweet of the archeology department of Jerusalem and its "stubborn people." It drove a wedge between the Tel Aviv and the Jerusalem schools, which still holds twenty years later. Ben-Tor told me, "Because we have no evidence of Solomon, and there was no statehood, what do they say about him in Tel Aviv? 'Chief.' 'A neglected backwater.' What kind of talk is that? *Chief*? I can say, 'The idiot that teaches archeology.' *Prove* that he's a chief! A hundred and fifty years later someone in Aramaic still talks about the 'House of David.' That's more than a chief, no?"

Whenever Finkelstein visited the United States, with its heavy influence of religious seminaries, he was met with antagonism. At a conference in San Francisco, an audience member beseeched him, "Why are you *saying* these things?" The highly regarded *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* began rejecting his papers but continued to publish his detractors. In hindsight, Finkelstein told me in his office, he understands the uproar over the United Monarchy. "The description is of a glorious kingdom, a huge empire, authors in the king's court, a huge army, military conquests—and

then someone like me comes along and says, 'Wait a minute. They were nothing but hillbillies who sat in Jerusalem in a small territory, and the rest of it is either theology or ideology,' " Finkelstein said. "So someone for whom the Bible represents the word of God views what I have to say with complete shock."

For decades, Israeli archeology mirrored the country's politics: it reconstructed the story of an unlikely conquest and a spectacular military expansion. Finkelstein opened up the discipline to larger questions of how peoples move and states form. William Schniedewind, a professor of Biblical studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, told me, "He's an incredibly original thinker, and also a really brilliant scholar. But he's also a person who's trying to win the game of scholarship. So he's laying down facts on the ground."

Finkelstein is the author of several books, including two mass-market titles that he wrote with Neil Silberman, a journalist and historian. These books advance his belief that the Bible should be understood from the perspective not of the events it depicts but of the period in which it was written. That period begins around 722 B.C., when the mighty northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria, leaving only its lesser southern neighbor, Judah. Like some other scholars, Finkelstein argues that, when the Assyrians seized Israel, waves of refugees began to flood Judah. In just a few years, he asserts, Jerusalem's population grew from a thousand to twelve thousand. This mass migration brought with it the need to form a communal identity, backed by a "dream of a past golden age—real or imagined—when their ancestors were settled securely in well-defined territories and enjoyed the divine promise of eternal peace and prosperity," Finkelstein and Silberman write, in "The Bible Unearthed," from 2001.

That job fell mostly to Josiah, a direct descendant of David's, who ruled Judah in the seventh century B.C. Josiah is described in the Scriptures as the saintliest of kings. No wonder, Finkelstein argues. The core of the Bible was composed during his time, as an attempt to lend his rule divine legitimacy by rewriting the stories of his ancestors—Moses, Joshua, and David. "The very outlines of those great characters," Finkelstein and Silberman write, "seem to be drawn with Josiah in mind."

The *Times*, reviewing "The Bible Unearthed," praised its "bold imagination and disciplined research." Not everyone agreed. William Dever, the longtime director of the Albright Institute of Archeological

Research, in Jerusalem, wrote in the *Biblical Archaeology Review* that the book was "an archeological manifesto, not judicious, well-balanced scholarship." Dever, who is eighty-six, is a swaggering, charismatic, and prolific author and excavator of ancient Israel—not unlike Finkelstein. For many years, the two men engaged in amicable competition. Finkelstein considered Dever a Bible literalist disguised as a liberal; Dever has never accepted Finkelstein's low chronology.

When Dever's review of "The Bible Unearthed" came out, Finkelstein was enraged. "His fury extended not only to Dever, but to me," Hershel Shanks, who edited that review, wrote in a blow-by-blow account of the feud, in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*. In 2002, Dever and Finkelstein met in a Toronto hotel room, agreed to put their differences behind them, and signed a joint letter deploring the "polemics which all too often embarrasses our profession." Finkelstein didn't mention that he had recently given an interview describing Dever as a "jealous academic parasite," or that he had written an article that called Dever's lifework of excavating the city of Gezer a "debacle," and accused him of bulldozing part of the dig—a cardinal sin in archeology. Dever, who has said that he used a bulldozer only to remove dirt left by a previous excavator, withdrew his signature from their letter, and told Shanks that Finkelstein's attack amounted to "character assassination."

Once, after Finkelstein gave a lecture, Dever went onstage and accused him of pushing post-Zionism—the idea, popularized by some left-leaning Israeli historians, that the Jewish state has served its purpose. Finkelstein was affronted. "I don't recall you standing next to me when I cast my vote in the last elections in Israel!" he snapped. In recent decades, post-Zionism has spread through academic circles, and the debates that it inspires have inevitably circled back to the Bible—specifically to a dispute between two opposing camps of Biblical scholars known as the maximalists and the minimalists. If maximalists treat the Bible as verifiable fact, the minimalists treat it as fiction: a near-mythological account, composed between 500 and 200 B.C., that should be understood within a purely literary framework. Their skepticism often manifests in a fondness for scare quotes. One book, from 1992, is titled "In Search of 'Ancient Israel.' " Another, from five years later, asks, "Can a 'History of Israel' Be Written?" To the minimalists, David was an invention, and the inscription bearing his name was likely a forgery. "Just as Shakespeare's play 'Julius Caesar' doesn't teach us about ancient Rome, the Bible can't teach us historic facts," the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand said in an interview, from 2012, in which he praised Finkelstein's work.

Finkelstein, whose theories call for the Davidic story to be reassessed, not abandoned, rejects post-Zionism and minimalism. Like Dever, he dates the bulk of Deuteronomistic history (the Books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., bringing it much closer to the events described. But the minimalists do not rile him. The maximalists do. "For me, the literal reading isn't only wrongheaded but it actually detracts from the Biblical authors," Finkelstein told me. "Only when you read them critically do you understand their genius." He is especially disdainful of scholars who claim to have found archeological proof of the Bible's veracity. "Just provide me with a few eroded sherds and the nightmare of critical scholarship will be beaten off," he said in a speech in 2017. This was seen as a thinly veiled attack on one scholar in particular: Yosef Garfinkel, the head of the Institute of Archeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In the past decade, as Finkelstein's revisionist chronology of ancient Israel has come under fire, Garfinkel has emerged as its most prominent critic. Garfinkel is sixty-three, bald, round, and jocular, with a dimpled chin and a folksy, affable manner. When I visited him on a dig a few months ago, he offered me dried figs and dates, in celebration of Tu Bishvat, the Jewish new year for trees, and made me promise that I would return to the site with my children to see the "waterfalls of anemones" that were about to blossom.

The excavation was of Khirbet al-Ra'i, in the rolling Judean foothills of central Israel. Usually, an archeological site in Israel is categorized as either a *tel*, meaning a mound formed during thousands of years of human habitation, or a *khirbe*, Arabic for "ruin," a place of relatively short duration before its destruction. Finkelstein is drawn to the complexity of the former; Garfinkel likes the simplicity of the latter. "Destruction is a tragedy for the ancient people, but for us it's a hidden treasure," he told me.

Khirbet al-Ra'i is dotted with almond trees and wheat fields—a green horizon stretching north toward Jerusalem and west toward the coastal plains. Garfinkel is "ninety per cent certain" that it is also the Biblical city of Ziklag, where David sought refuge after fleeing Saul's envy. In the weeks before my visit, rainstorms had swept through the country, leaving the team of thirty excavators, most of them fresh-faced students from Australia's Macquarie University, to sit idle for days at a nearby kibbutz. Now the weather was clear, and they were back, and eager. Their energy was devoted to a silo in one corner of the dig, where last year's delegation had unearthed two potsherds bearing a script of five proto-Canaanite letters.

The volunteers treated the silo like forensic evidence. They cleaned it with soft-bristle brushes, then collected the dirt and sifted it in large mesh screens. Though the surrounding area was caked in mud, complicating their work, they marked each tiny artifact, then labelled it and sealed it away. One student, on her first dig, let out a shriek. She had discovered four olive pits that could now be used for radiocarbon dating. (Short-lived organic materials make for the most reliable samples.) Another volunteer, wearing a billowy dress over sweatpants, trundled by with a loaded wheelbarrow that nearly tipped over. "The new ones will wear themselves out today and crash tomorrow," an excavator told me. "The more experienced ones will pace themselves."

Like most archeological digs, the site had been divided into a symmetrical grid, but digging across the grid wasn't uniform. Some squares were knee-deep, while others dropped ten feet underground. Not only did the result look uneven—a topographical Tetris—but it meant that excavators were literally standing in different time periods. "Hellenistic," Garfinkel said, pointing at one volunteer. "Iron Age," he said, pointing at another. He shook his head at the mess. Then he alighted on something else: "We once had a volunteer from Papua New Guinea!" Garfinkel has a boundless, easily distractible curiosity, and a mind that fixates on eccentric facts. In the middle of showing me chambers that his team had unearthed, he veered off into a discourse on the holistic qualities of the mandrake.

Garfinkel grew up in a secular home in Haifa. He joined the archeology department in Jerusalem in 1992, researching prehistory and writing books on Neolithic pottery and the origins of dance. At a kibbutz near the Jordan River, he unearthed a cache of human figurines from the sixth millennium B.C. that has since been exhibited in the Louvre and elsewhere. ("Gallery 1 at the Met is all me," he told me.) He also brought up two sons, under demanding conditions. Since 2004, his wife, a scholar of women and gender in the Talmudic era, has spent half of each year in Berlin, teaching at the Free University. In 2007, Garfinkel changed specialties: noting a dearth of Biblical archeologists at the Hebrew University, he decided to switch from prehistory to the more "recent past," as he put it. For that, however, he needed a dig.

As Garfinkel was making his foray into the Iron Age, Finkelstein's theory sustained its first major blow. In East Jerusalem, an archeologist named Eilat Mazar uncovered the foundation walls of a large public building, on a slope that descends from the Temple Mount. That slope had been known since the early nineteen-hundreds as the City of David, the site of the Biblical capital. Its location neatly corresponds with a verse in the Book of Samuel, which describes a palace that the King of Tyre built

for David. The palace is said to have been erected near a citadel—and Mazar's find was bordered by a massive stepped-stone wall, believed by many archeologists to be part of that citadel.

It was nearly impossible to date conclusively: Jerusalem has been inhabited almost continuously for three millennia, with each generation building atop the one before. But Mazar's structure created what's known as an archeological sandwich; pottery shards found directly above it were dated to the ninth century B.C., and those below it were dated to the eleventh century B.C. Mazar concluded that the structure was built in the tenth century B.C., and exclaimed in the Hebrew press, "I have found the palace of King David!"

Her announcement drew immediate rebukes. Finkelstein and three colleagues wrote a cutting takedown in *Tel Aviv,* a peer-reviewed journal of archeology that Finkelstein edits for Tel Aviv University. ("Our enemies call us *Pravda*," he says proudly.) They claimed that the walls that Mazar had excavated represented several phases of construction, none of which originated when she claimed they did. "She says it's a majestic building from the tenth century, and that it's the palace of King David," Finkelstein told me recently. "Not one word in that sentence is true." Yet other archeologists found Mazar's discovery jolting. After decades in which it appeared that there was no evidence of the United Monarchy, now there was at least the possibility of *something*.

Garfinkel followed this debate from the sidelines, impatient to join in. "I kept thinking, What's the greatest intellectual contribution of Israel to world culture? The Bible," he told me. One day, a student of his, who worked for Israel's Antiquities Authority, approached him after class and described a promising site. Known as Khirbet Qeiyafa, it was a lush but abandoned ruin, twenty miles west of Jerusalem, ringed by what appeared to be a fortified wall. Garfinkel and the student, Sa'ar Ganor, decided to conduct a test dig. Within ten days, they had reached a layer containing ceramics that could be dated to the Iron Age. "But how ancient?" Garfinkel recalls thinking. "Tenth century? Ninth century?"

By the following year, it had become clear that they were unearthing a buried city. "A Biblical Pompeii," Garfinkel called it. They managed to collect burned olive pits from the site, five of which were sent to Oxford University for dating. "I knew that King David—that all of it—might be solved by a handful of pits," Garfinkel told me. Overcome by nerves, he accidentally shipped his credit card to the lab in the package containing the pits. If the results came back showing 850 B.C., he said, "I

would have received an honorary doctorate from Tel Aviv University." Instead, they pointed to a date range of between 1050 and 970 B.C. *Bingo*.

Even Garfinkel's critics greeted his discovery with awe. "Before visiting there, I said to myself, 'No way is this a site from the tenth century,' " Finkelstein told me. "And it is. He proved it." But was Qeiyafa part of David's kingdom, as Garfinkel claimed? After looking at the fortifications, Finkelstein decided that they couldn't have been built by David, and should perhaps be attributed to a king in northern Israel. Other scholars suggested that the site was Philistine, because of its relative proximity to the coast. Still others said that it was built not by Judeans but by Canaanites, which seemed to make the most sense geographically. As Nadav Na'aman, of Tel Aviv University, said, "The burden of proof is on him to show that it *isn't* Canaanite."

Garfinkel dismissed these notions. Qeiyafa is too far removed to be an outpost of the northern kingdom. The site was conspicuously free of pig bones, ruling out the pork-eating Philistines. The structural features—a four-chambered casemate wall, two city gates, and a clear delineation between private and public functions—were, he argues, the "blueprint" for what became Judean architecture.

Yet Garfinkel agreed with Finkelstein that David's territory was likely small—perhaps only Hebron, Jerusalem, and Qeiyafa, which he identified as the Biblical city of Sha'arayim. This is a testament to how entrenched Finkelstein's theory has become: the argument is now over a few decades and a few square miles. The salami slices are paper-thin.

But, within that narrow space, Garfinkel argues, David led an unprecedented political transformation. In a region surrounded by autonomous city-states, he slowly forms a kingdom. He builds a city, establishes a tax system, fosters a court of scribes. To confer legitimacy, he brings an old relic, known as the Ark of the Covenant, to Jerusalem, where it helps to anchor a centralized cult. His son erects a palace, large enough to store a year's worth of oil and wine, and a temple, built from Lebanon cedar overlaid with gold.

"David was the greatest genius who ever lived between the Mediterranean and Jordan," Garfinkel told me. "So what do they do? They come in and erase him. In a thousand years, no one will know who Garfinkel or Finkelstein or the minimalists are, but they will all know who David is." Garfinkel has

called his discovery of Qeiyafa "a death blow to minimalists." In his presentations of the site, he has taken to including photographs of a cemetery, stating that he has "buried" Finkelstein's theory.

Ben-Tor, of the Hebrew University, who is a friend of Garfinkel's, warned me that this kind of taunting inspired animosity. "When you go to Tel Aviv and mention Yossi Garfinkel's name, they'll stone you," he said. He wasn't wrong, exactly. Oded Lipschits, a professor of archeology who has collaborated with Finkelstein, cut me off before I finished saying Garfinkel's name. "Yossi Garfinkel is a prehistorian who hadn't dealt with this period before, and he came into it with no real understanding," he said. Finkelstein accused Garfinkel of excavating too hastily—the old bulldozer argument—and of a simplistic reading of Biblical texts. "I come from a generation that cares a great deal about how Israel and the Jewish people are perceived," he told me. "When I sit in a conference abroad, and he goes onstage and says primitive things, I want to die from embarrassment."

The issue of funding didn't help. In digging for the past, Israeli archeologists are painfully aware of the future: their excavations depend on donors whose interests often lie outside academic research. Many are religious, and titillated by the prospect of proving the written word; others are right-wing, and intent on justifying Jewish claims to the land of Greater Israel. Some are both. Schniedewind, of U.C.L.A., told me that Garfinkel's excavations "have been seminal, but his interpretations sometimes are a little bit . . . Well, I mean, you need money, right?"

Garfinkel's research has been supported by a French Algerian-born Israeli named Madeleine Mumcuoglu, who made a fortune from a homeopathic cold remedy. She is now a research fellow at the Hebrew University's Institute of Archeology and a co-author, with Garfinkel, of a book called "Solomon's Temple and Palace." "What fascinates me is if I can scientifically prove that one item or one word in the Bible is accurate," she told me, when I met her at the dig. Garfinkel's first season at Qeiyafa was underwritten by an organization called Foundation Stone, whose director lived in a West Bank settlement and which boasted of using history to inform "Jewish identity." Garfinkel told me that Israeli archeologists "have two huge weights on our shoulders. One is that the Bible is a religious manuscript—billions of people believe it's the word of God." This, he acknowledged, "can stand in the way of objectivity." The other weight, he said, "is the current political situation."

The City of David, in East Jerusalem, is both a settlement and an excavation site, a gaping maze of stones and stairs that run beneath the Palestinian village of Silwan. There are more than thirty thousand archeological sites in Israel—a country the size of New Jersey—but none as scrutinized and fought over as those in Jerusalem, where history, religion, and politics are uniquely hard to separate.

On a balmy day in March, Arab children tricycled along a corrugated metal fence, while, on the other side, students from Germany trowelled the ground fifty feet below. Israel Finkelstein maneuvered his car into a narrow spot reserved for excavators as a cacophony of horns blared behind him. (Parking in the Old City is an extreme sport.) "What a dump," he grumbled, then quickly added, "An important and interesting place—but what a dump." He stepped outside. Blinded for a moment by the midmorning sun, he removed his cashmere sweater and tied it around his slim waist. (A tennis injury last year has converted him to Pilates.) Then he beelined to the dig's visitor center, bought a ticket, and smirked at the brochure. It read, "City of David. Where It All Began."

In the early nineties, a little-known organization called Elad began to buy and seize the homes of Palestinian families in Silwan, and install Jewish families in their place. Palestinian witnesses say that the organization, headed by a former military commander and yeshiva teacher named David Be'eri, used threats, forged documents, and fraudulent statements in the process. (Elad denies any wrongdoing, pointing to recent victories in Israeli courts.) Finkelstein told me, of Be'eri, "He looks like a paratrooper from the fifties, with his tzitzit"—prayer tassels—"and his sandals, but he's extremely sophisticated." Once Be'eri established himself, he started excavating under the houses of the village. "At some point this reached the court," Be'eri told a group of visitors to the site, in 2008. "The judge asked me, 'How can you dig underneath their homes?' I told him, *'I'm* digging underneath their homes? King David dug underneath their homes! I'm just cleaning.' " The group erupted in laughter.

By then, the Israeli government had given Elad legal ownership of about a quarter of Silwan's land, and awarded the group a contract to develop the City of David as a national park. Under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Elad has become the main sponsor of archeological excavations in East Jerusalem. It has renovated and opened to the public an array of ancient relics: a Herodian pool, a water tunnel believed to have been built by King Hezekiah, the large stone structure that Eilat

Mazar excavated. There are three active digs, where spectators can observe the archeological work from raised platforms. Last year, more than a million people visited these sites.

Finkelstein objects to politicizing the site, but he credits Elad with making archeology accessible. "If you were to let the state do it, it would have taken four hundred years," he said, as we descended the stairs of Mazar's structure. "These are amazing things. They're exposing the history of Jerusalem. So, O.K., they have their agenda, but they don't interfere in the research." In the eighties, Finkelstein led an excavation of the ancient city of Shiloh, in the West Bank, but he has since eschewed archeological work in the occupied territories. Still, he says, "Jerusalem isn't Nablus," adding, "I don't see any reason, including international law, to stop Israeli research in Jerusalem."

The Palestinians see it differently. They regard East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, and argue that Elad has made partition impossible. "The settler groups in Jerusalem, they are in control," Jawad Siyam, who founded an information center based in Silwan, has said. Last year, after a three-decade legal battle, a Jerusalem court ordered Siyam's family out of their home, and settlers from Elad moved in.

Yuval Gadot, who heads the largest active excavation in the City of David, defended his work. "Imagine going to Athens and what you see are people's homes, not the Acropolis," he told me. But Yonathan Mizrachi, the director of a group of archeologists who oppose digging on occupied land, said that Elad is disregarding four thousand years of other peoples' history to focus exclusively on the Bible. "Elad realized long ago that archeology is the strongest ticket they have to justifying Jewish settlement," he told me. He criticized not only the organization and its backers in government but also researchers from Tel Aviv University, whom he regards as complicit in laying waste to the area. "Research has its limit, and we are way past those limits," he told me.

Though Finkelstein sees no moral impediment to excavating in the City of David, he says that it may not, technically speaking, be the City of David at all. Peering over Gadot's dig, he told me, "I see a Byzantine building, I see a Roman villa, I see houses from the Second Temple period." What he doesn't see is evidence of a palace, or a temple, or a fortified wall, or an inscription, or substantial pottery—anything whatsoever from the early Iron Age period of the United Monarchy.

He also doesn't see evidence of a *tel*, the mound on which ancient kings resided. "Where is it?" he asked. Then, cheekily, he stuck out his index finger and pointed north. In the past several years, Finkelstein has become persuaded by a theory, published by the German Biblical scholar Ernst Axel Knauf in 2000, that argues that Biblical Jerusalem was situated atop the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism and home to two of the holiest sites in Islam: the al-Aqsa Mosque and the gold-capped Dome of the Rock. In a 2011 paper, Finkelstein and two co-authors suggested that during periods of expansion the city overflowed southward, toward what's now known as the City of David. But its center—no more than a village chiefdom, in the tenth century B.C.—stood on the most elevated point of the Mount itself.

Aside from Finkelstein and his co-authors, almost no one accepts this idea. For one thing, the Temple Mount is far from the main water source of the Gihon Spring, which lies directly below the ridge of the City of David. But Na'aman told me that he had recently learned of a tiny clay shard, found at the foot of the Temple Mount, that contained sediment from the Nile. It appeared to have been part of a correspondence between the rulers of Egypt and Canaan in the fourteenth century B.C. How did the shard get there, if not by tumbling down from the royal center? By floating this theory, Finkelstein has, ironically, helped the maximalists come up with an explanation for the paucity of evidence from the United Monarchy: in the first century B.C., Herod the Great built a mammoth compound on the Temple Mount, and whatever had stood there before was levelled. "In an upside-down kind of logic, who's the greatest savior of Jerusalem?" he asked me. "Your miserable slave!"

Yet there is no way to prove—or to refute—his theory. The Temple Mount is protected by Israeli law as a holy place, which clearly precludes excavation. Any attempt to disrupt the site's intricate security arrangements, which have been in effect since 1967, has led to serious violence. Earlier this year, Finkelstein appeared on an Israeli podcast about the Bible, where he spoke of his growing conviction that the Temple Mount once housed David's royal city. "Imagine if you could dig there," the host told him. "How quickly would you rush out of the studio and go?" Finkelstein deadpanned: "I would rush out of the studio, head to the airport, and leave the country. Because you know what such attempts would lead to."

There is another explanation for the failure to locate the ruins of David's palace: he never had one. In this version of the tale, next door to the urban Philistines an extraordinary settlement of

tent-dwellers rose, with David as its nomad king. From his roving capital, he oversaw a web of trade relations that stretched from Jordan to Cyprus and beyond—and also imposed taxes on neighboring peoples, setting up levy points along trade routes and threatening war if his men weren't paid. Within the tent city, his wealth was manifested in feasts of tender calves, shellfish hauled in from the Mediterranean, ripe grapes, and pistachios. His ruling élite dressed in the finest clothes, made by boiling woad leaves and madder roots to produce dyes of dazzling cerulean and ruby. It was all glorious and undeniably regal—but none of it was permanent, and within a few generations every trace had vanished.

The basis of much of this wealth, one theory holds, was mining. Close to the southern tip of Israel, nestled in the great expanses of the Arabah Valley, are the ancient mines of Timna. On a brisk evening, I was picked up from the local airport by Erez Ben-Yosef, a soft-spoken archeologist from Tel Aviv University who leads an expedition in the area. That day, he had been digging since first light, and was visibly beat, his small frame bent over the wheel. As we drove through empty desert roads, a wind kicked up little sand cyclones. Otherwise, it was quiet—so quiet that the entire valley seemed to hum. "There is nothing here," Ben-Yosef admitted. Except, that is, for what had brought him out here: some ten thousand tons of ancient copper slag.

Ben-Yosef's focus is metallurgy, "the temperature of the furnace, that kind of thing," as he put it. But, at forty-one, he also belongs to a younger generation of archeologists steeped in Foucault and social anthropology. He believes that copper production holds the key to unlocking the truth about David and Solomon's kingdom.

Timna sits in the valley where, in the thirties, Nelson Glueck declared that he had found Solomon's mines. Three decades later, Glueck's longtime assistant demolished his theory, by unearthing an Egyptian shrine, dating to the fourteenth century B.C. Since then, archeologists have attributed the local copper industry to the New Kingdom Empire of Egypt, a narrative so prevalent that, at the Timna campsite, we were greeted by cutouts of Cleopatra look-alikes: outstretched palms, beaded hair.

Yet Ben-Yosef, together with his mentor, Thomas Levy, of the University of California, San Diego, has been able to resolve, through advanced radiocarbon dating, that copper production thrived in the region between the eleventh and the ninth centuries B.C.—long after the Egyptians withdrew. Ben-

Yosef attributes this flourishing industry to the Edomites, described in the Bible as descendants of Esau and, later, as vassals of King David's.

Last October, twenty years after *Haaretz* had declared on its front page that there was "no evidence" for the Bible, Ben-Yosef published an article—also on the front page of *Haaretz*—challenging that notion. In it, he argued that some ancient societies may be invisible to archeologists but may nevertheless have created sophisticated social structures. In making his case, Ben-Yosef drew on one of the first archeologists to describe "invisible societies": Israel Finkelstein, in his book "Living on the Fringe." But Ben-Yosef believes that Finkelstein "missed the point," and was perhaps blinkered by his own experience with the historic Bedouin tribes of Sinai.

The Bedouins who had informed the archeologists' thinking on ancient Israel were "simple," Ben-Yosef said: "No hierarchy, no law, and if you travelled through you had to pay them baksheesh." But there are also examples throughout history of complex nomadic societies. Just look at Genghis Khan, Ben-Yosef argued. Or, for that matter, at the mounds of copper-production debris that we were driving through. Such an endeavor required a hierarchy of miners, smelters, and exporters, and a political structure powerful enough to sustain peaceful trade in the region. Theirs was the ancient "Silicon Valley," as Levy told me. Because these were nomads, however, they did not leave behind substantial signs of habitation or material wealth. "As archeologists, we wouldn't know about any of this had they not engaged in copper production," Ben-Yosef said. If archeology nearly missed the Edomite kingdom, what other ancient kingdom might it be missing?

At dawn the next morning, some two dozen excavators drove in vans to an ancient smelting site near an area known as Slaves' Hill. There they dispersed, pushing wheelbarrows across barren ground blackened by slag and mottled with craters. It was like digging on the moon. While most excavations have to go deep underground, in Timna the archeological find is right there, in the open, in the form of slag and charcoal—mountains and mountains of it. "There was only one trail climbing up, where two donkeys could pass each other," Ben-Yosef explained as we crested Slaves' Hill. I couldn't resist scooping up a charred speck from the ground. Three thousand years old. I didn't know whether to pocket it or return it, and so I held it in my fist while we spoke.

Conversation soon turned to David, the bandit leader, the Biblical shepherd turned king. Ben-Yosef believes that the Edomite kingdom may not have been solely responsible for the prosperous copper

trade: David and Solomon may have presided over it. How else to explain the boom in industry during the tenth century B.C.? "The scale of production tells us that there was something bigger than a few tribes here," he said. To view David as a marginal Bedouin sheikh would be a mistake, Ben-Yosef thinks. So would holding our breath for signs of his lavish kingdom. "If he came from a nomadic background, it doesn't make sense that the first thing he would do is build a big stone palace," Ben-Yosef said. "Why would he?" ♦

Published in the print edition of the June 29, 2020, issue, with the headline "Built on Sand."

Ruth Margalit is a writer based in Tel Aviv.