Lawrence Schiffman

Dr. Schiffman is chair of New York University's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and serves as Ethel and Irvin A. Edelman professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies.

Making the Bible Come to Life: Biblical Archaeology and the Teaching of Tanakh in Jewish Schools

The study of biblical archaeology as we know it began to flourish in the late eighteenth century and grew to great prominence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Previously, there had been important archaeological finds, though often merely by chance.[1] During the Renaissance, as interest in classical archaeology arose in Europe, there were Jews who sought to explore the material remnants of antiquity in the Land of Israel so as to identify biblical sites[2] and corroborate the claims of Jewish history.[3] But only when the European imperial powers seized control of the lands of the Near East did archaeological activity expand and mature into a rigorous, professional discipline.[4] By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian scholars, followed by Jewish scholars, unearthed numerous sites connected to passages in the Bible; to this day archaeologists continue to find artifacts that contribute to our understanding of the ancient world.

And yet, rich as many of the discoveries have been, they have not found their way into the educational programs of Orthodox institutions in America. Possibly, in a different intellectual climate the use of archaeological material would be common and its value self-evident. However, study of the Bible in the contemporary Orthodox scene often centers around homiletical commentaries and discussions that do not undertake to understand and interpret the plain meaning of *Tanakh* (which is what the medieval commentators sought). Rather, the Bible is commonly used to convey messages generated centuries after the close of the Bible.[5] Now, it need not detract from one's appreciation of the valuable lessons that are drawn to note that this kind of study directs the focus away from the ancient setting of the text. Not much is made of the

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great archaeological discoveries pertaining to the Bible—inscriptions,[6] literary and religious texts,[7] early biblical and Jewish manuscripts,[8] artifacts, structures, and more—though a surprisingly large number of Orthodox Jews have become archaeology buffs and subscribe to such periodicals as *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

While the prevailing approach to biblical study reinforces one's appreciation for the Torah's perpetual depth, it lays aside the import of language, history, geography, and other areas of study with a great deal to say to us about the books of our tradition. In the school curriculum, the added fear of wandering into the quicksand of heterodoxy deters engagement with rich archaeology material. A full-scale commentary on the Bible designed for the modern Orthodox community could do much toward addressing the deficit in our appreciation of scholarly enhancements to *talmud Torah*. But while such an ambitious work remains to be produced, there is much that can be done in its absence to enrich the study of *Tanakh* in our day schools with judicious selection of the appropriate material.[9] The following article addresses the underlying ideological, religious, and intellectual issues connected with the use of archaeological resources, and proposes concrete avenues for making use of them in educational settings.

II.

The fundamental issue surrounding the use of archaeological material to illuminate the Bible duplicates the classic *Torah u-Madda* question: How ought we to make use of wisdom or learning that can contribute to our spiritual lives or to our understanding of Torah when much of it has been developed outside the confines of our tradition? Even if archeological data plainly supported the details of the biblical narrative, there are those who might question the need for external scientific or academic support for what faith alone ought to embrace.[10] This can be a difficult objection to maintain, as we live quite comfortably with innumerable "external" intellectual ideas integrated into our school curricula —indeed, our very way of thinking about the world. Delicate faith can be tested by any number of secular disciplines. Of course, biblical archaeology presents a more serious challenge, for in the hands of some interpreters, discoveries can be used to challenge the truth or accuracy of the biblical narrative. Still—or perhaps, therefore—I submit that it is imperative for us to assimilate challenging material into our study of

Torah. Students ought to see that Orthodoxy can not only live with archaeology but comfortably appreciate it, before they encounter it for the first time in a setting less sympathetic to tradition.[11]

It may further be objected that using material developed outside the tradition gives credence to the learning of the non-observant or the non-Jewish. Interestingly, the early professional archaeologists, Christian to the last man, sought through their research to prove the truth of the Bible. Only relatively recently, with the influx of large numbers of Jews into the field, has biblical archaeology evolved from its original, exclusively devotional aims to become a detached subject of scholarly inquiry, although not always detached. There are some scholars who have taken as their life's work the task of debunking the Bible and the biblical-historical tradition.[12] In some cases, their aims are patently post-Zionist, anti-Zionist, anti-religious, and anti-Semitic. But again, it is this precisely which compels us to understand the record properly within the context of our traditions of biblical interpretation.[13]

Perhaps the most important argument for the integration of archaeological material is that we ignore it at risk to our very understanding of the Bible. Many archaeological sites have yielded clues to understanding the historical and geographical background of scriptural narratives that would otherwise be confusing. Archaeology can be crucial to understanding *peshat* itself. It is hoped that the following illustrations are convincing arguments for the value of biblical archaeology as a means of enhancing Torah study.

III.

The high-school level stands to benefit most from serious discussion of the issues raised by biblical archaeology. Students, especially those going off to universities, should be prepared for serious intellectual challenges, many of which are politically charged, such as issues concerning the historical relationship of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and to the Temple Mount.

There are different ways biblical archaeology might be included in the yeshiva high school course of study. It might comprise a a special course—as a full elective class or as part of some series of mini-courses or units. This approach offers the advantage of allowing for concentrated reading and discussion. The drawback is that such a class would likely be limited to particular issues and would not integrate the archaeo-

logical material with the regular study of biblical texts. Thus, the second option, which has biblical archaeology incorporated into the standard courses in *Tanakh*. The advantage here is that it is possible to present the archaeological data in its proper context, giving a more representative picture, rather than a general survey of particular issues. (The aptitude of the teachers with the material should be an important factor in deciding which is the wiser course.)

IV.

Ancient Near Eastern literature has been a rapidly expanding corpus since archaeologists began digging up tablets in Mesopotamia and Syria, hieroglyphic documents in Egypt, and stone inscriptions in Canaan/Israel. These testify to the advanced cultures surrounding Israel and to the close and contrasting relationship between the nascent Israelite religion and the religions of Israel's neighbors.[14] While in some hands these texts can be misrepresented to detract from the aura of the biblical tradition, in the right hands they highlight the unique contributions of the Bible to human civilization, which ought to be of great pride to students. Let me give a few examples.

The Atrahasis epic presents a version of the Mesopotamian creation and flood epic.[15] That story has humanity created to serve the gods, but does not conceive of man as the pinnacle of creation. Further, the god does not breathe his spirit into man, but expectorates into the dirt to create him. Here, humanity has no great reason for being. Humans are not "a little lower than the angels" (*Psalms* 8:6), created in the image of God, but earthy creatures. The flood takes place in this epic, not because of the sinfulness of humans, but because some of the gods think humans make too much noise. Moral purposefulness is absent; all that matters is the capricious desires of the gods. The well-known epic of Gilgamesh, read in many college humanities courses, is an account of flood with many parallels to the story of Noah and many stark ethical and theological contrasts. In spite of the very different way the stories are told, the common account leads us to assume that there must have been *some* epochal historical event that was recorded by all these ancient civilizations in their own ways.

The law codes of Mesopotamia yield important contrasts to the Bible. In the prologue to the eighteenth-century B.C.E. Code of Hammurabi, there is a call for "true justice" in the name of the gods.

However, even free people are treated unequally; the *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye) is understood and presumably applied literally, and justice is ultimately determined through trial by ordeal. Against the background of other such erratic principles, one can better see the revolution in morals and standards of justice that the Bible heralded.

A further example is presented by the biblical laws against superstition and idolatry. The texts from Ugarit and Ras Shamra in northern Syria, dated to c. 1400 B.C.E., outline the rituals of the Canaanite cults against which the biblical prophets preached so strongly. The battle against Canaanite religion exemplifies the perpetual struggle to uphold the God of Israel and His ways in the face of barbarism. This is an issue of great importance in the world of today.

Rambam stresses how many of the biblical commandments were designed to separate Israel from the idolatrous practices of their neighbors.[16] Reading Canaanite, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian texts, one can see many of these contrasts to the *mitsvot*. In ancient Egypt the Pharaohs regularly entered into incestuous marriages. Further, biblical opposition to the cult of the dead can be understood in light of the extravagant burial practices of the Egyptian monarchy, which were predicated on the divinity of the dead king and the need to supply his mummified body with material goods and companions for the afterlife (the latter duly killed for the purpose).

The physical remnants of these civilizations also allow us to understand the biblical passages countering their cultic practices. Archaeologists have unearthed numerous physical representations of gods and goddesses; fertility figurines, gods in the shape of animals, and paraphernalia used for polytheistic worship.

Above all, the ancient Near Eastern material gives a sense of the environment into which the Bible came into being and functioned. We are better able to understand the revolution in religion and morals that the Bible created—and still creates—and to see, in Rambam's adaptation of Rabbi Yishmael's homily, that the "Torah speaks in the language of humans."

V.

More challenging is the historicity of the Exodus from Egypt and the Conquest of the land of Canaan. Here there are debates among archaeologists about what the historical record says. Complex in themselves,

they are made the more so for being politicized and contorted in the context of the contemporary Arab-Israeli conflict.

Earlier biblical archaeologists dated the Conquest to the thirteenth century B.C.E. and identified evidence of a destruction layer in Canaan that they attributed to the Israelite army. From this observation, it was but one step to the conclusion that the sojourn in Egypt and the Exodus were historical events, even if some of the details were said to be mythical and not necessarily to be taken literally.[17] This point of view, which can be sympathetic to tradition, has recently been challenged by scholars who argue that there is no direct evidence for either the Exodus or the Conquest, and, therefore, that neither event ever took place.[18] The conclusion is somewhat wanting in logic, and some of its most ardent proponents are also known for their strongly anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian biases.

We need to teach students what can reasonably be expected of historical and archaeological evidence for this period—what it can and cannot say. We might show them the Meneptah Stele from Egypt[19] that testifies to the Conquest; the evidence for a complete cultural change in thirteenth-twelfth-century B.C.E. Canaan, as described in the book of Judges more than in Joshua, the book actually detailing the Conquest; and the Egyptian historical accounts as preserved by the fourth-century B.C.E. Egyptian historian Manetho, in turn preserved by Josephus, who lived in the first century C.E.[20] All of this, plus Egyptian material that helps in explaining the environment and historical background, could be taught and explained. Still, we need not be too exuberant, especially when we lack direct proof. The role of archaeology, is best seen, merely, as an aid to our understanding of the Bible and as an ancillary support for tradition.[21]

We need to teach students that the approach to biblical history that assumes that absence of evidence proves that something did not happen should be rejected. This is counter both to logic and to the progress of archaeology, which constantly sees new discoveries supplying evidence not previously available.

VI.

Once we reach the period of the monarchy, the clear relevance of the evidence makes it much easier to apply in the classroom. The Tel Dan Stele mentions the House of David,[22] and confirms the basic lines of the bibli-

cal account of Northern Israel's relations with Aram. Other texts and inscriptions illustrate the place of Judah and Israel in the ancient Near East. Because of the abundance of information we have, students can be taken on "virtual" visits to sites described in the Bible like Meggido or Hazor where the district capitals have been recovered. The Siloam Tunnel Inscription,[23] for example, brings to life not only biblical details, but their rabbinic interpretation.[24] Other texts fill in background data and make mention of rulers of Judah, Israel, and their neighbors, and confirm the immense size of the kingdoms, of their cities and armies.

Ample material about daily life is available: why not let students see how the ancients lived: houses, pots and pans, burial sites, jewelry—all the appurtenances of daily life that bridge the imagination's gap between our ancestors and ourselves?[25]

Finally, issues pertaining to Jerusalem and the Temple, important in themselves, are all the more so because of the specious claims advanced by antagonists of Jewish claims to the Land of Israel. Our students need to have a sense of the geography and archaeology of ancient Jerusalem. The task is made difficult by the overlaying remains of the twice-built Second Temple. Nevertheless, concrete evidence for First-Temple-period Jerusalem does stand, and its mention in ancient or Near Eastern texts can help students in facing some of the false claims they may hear, as well as in understanding the Bible itself. For example, students can follow the tragedy of the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem in the contemporary Lakhish letters.[26]

VI.

In what follows, I shall attempt to call attention to elements of archaeological study that can be introduced to enliven elementary school *Humash* lessons. Here the point is not to engage young children in complex issues, but rather, essentially, to provide pictures of what is being studied. There are useful videos that have been produced for this purpose. Further material may be gathered to show the rhythms of daily life in the various Mesopotamian societies; one gets a better sense of the sacrifice made by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in moving to Canaan, when one sees how far less advanced it was as compared with their points of origin. Numerous available photographs illustrate the great architectural classics of ancient Mesopotamia and give a sense of the culture and civilization Avraham left. The cities and villages that

Abraham found in Canaan can also be illustrated. Archaeologists have been able to reconstruct numerous buildings, tools, and ritual objects from these societies. These can be used to illustrate the early professions described in *Genesis* 4—husbandry, farming, music, metal working. Objects from ancient Mesopotamia illustrate the performance of these tasks and the result of this labor.

For the Israelites in Egypt, Egyptian art and architecture can illustrate that environment. The letters from Deir el-Medina can be employed to illustrate the lives of people in the service of Pharaoh. For elementary-school children with less rigorously-controlled curricula, some time might be devoted to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia in history and social studies classes that will provide background for the study of *Tanakh*.

Once we reach the period of the Conquest in *Nakh*, especially *Nevi'im Rishonim*, the great wealth of archaeological material makes it easy to show students the (historical) reality of the stories under study. We know, for example, what the Israelite four-room house looked like, and we can locate virtually every important place mentioned in the bible through the use of archaeological evidence.

VII.

A final area that is relevant for all levels, and which has special significance for showing the continuity of our tradition, is archaeological evidence for ritual objects. Large numbers of *mikva'ot* found throughout the land of Israel and even in the diaspora testify to the assiduousness with which the Israelites observed the laws of *tum'a* and *tahara*, in all their myriad applications while the Temple stood, and, still after its destruction, with respect to family purity. Evidence for *tsitsit* from mishnaic times, including invalid vegetable-dyed *tekhelet*,[27] shows the quest for precision in observance of the law, something also observable in *tefillin* specimens excavated from Qumran and the Bar Kokhba caves.[28] Pictures of the oldest scrolls of biblical books found in Qumran can give students an idea of the continuity of scribal techniques and the antiquity of the Bible, even if we have to admit, with the rabbis, that some scrolls differ from the Masoretic text. A wealth of material pertaining to ancient synagogues in Israel and the Diaspora has been collected.[29] All these finds illustrate the vitality of law and tradition for our ancestors.[30]

VIII.

The final element of my proposal is for the creation of proper teaching materials that will enable archaeology to be brought into the classroom. At present, there are no textbooks, sourcebooks, teaching manuals, computer software, and audio-visual productions that gather together and distill the scholarly material in a form easily transmissible to yeshiva students. The willing teachers are left to do much of the labor on their own, with secular or Christian, or exclusively Hebrew raw materials. Again, it does not help matters that we lack an Orthodox Bible commentary in English that selectively integrates valuable scholarly material. Without an organized effort at all levels of educational planning, the use of biblical archaeology's riches in our schools will likely be episodic.

Two final suggestions therefore seem indicated. First, that there be special conferences or workshops which bring together scholars and educators to discuss the archaeological discoveries themselves, their surrounding religious and political issues, and how all of these might be taught. Second, a list of relevant material—texts, archaeological finds, and analysis—keyed to biblical passages, should be assembled and made easily accessible on a website. Such a website might also provide ancient Near Eastern texts in translation, maps designed for different age levels, and relevant pictures and captions that can be downloaded and distributed.

Like any curricular innovation, the introduction of biblical archaeology into our study of *Tanakh* requires efforts by many people on many fronts. But given the value of archaeology to learning *Tanakh*, the excitement it can spark for students of the Bible, and the pride in Jewish tradition it can instill and fortify, the effort ought to be made.

NOTES

1. J. Tigay, "'Archeology' of the Bible and Judaism in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages," in *The Archaeology of Jordan and Beyond: Essays in Honor of James A. Sauer*, ed. L.E. Stager, J.A. Greene, and M.D. Coogan (Harvard Semitic Museum Publications, Studies in the Archaeology and History of the Levant 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), pp. 490-97.
2. See Y Schwartz, *Tevu'ot ha-Arets* (Jerusalem, 1855), trans. I Leeser, *A Descriptive Geography and Brief Historical Sketch of Palestine* (Philadelphia, 1850); Estori ha-Farhi, *Kaftor va-Ferah* (Jerusalem, 1899).
3. C. Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 30-33.
4. N.A. Silberman, *Digging for God and Country: Exploration, Archaeology and the Secret Struggle for the Holy Land, 1799-1917* (New York: Knopf, 1982).
5. B.B. Levy, "The State and Directions of Orthodox Bible Study," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. S. Carmy (Orthodox Forum Series; Northvale and London: Jason Aronson, 1996), pp. 39-80; idem, "Our Torah, Your Torah, and Their Torah: An Evaluation of the ArtScroll Phenomenon," in *Truth and Compassion: Essays on Judaism and Religion in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Solomon Frank*, ed. H. Joseph, J.N. Lightstone, and M.D. Oppenheim (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), pp. 157-89.
6. Hebrew material is conveniently collected in G.I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions, Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
7. Ancient Near Eastern texts are collected in J.B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (third edition with supplement; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) and W. Hallo and K.L. Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture* (3 volumes, Leiden: Brill, 1997-2002).
8. For an introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls, see my *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994).
9. The Hebrew *Da'at Mikra* series of Mosad Harav Kook is a vital resource; an English translation of the commentary on *Psalms* has recently been issued in three volumes. It is the first of a projected full series.
10. For a general discussion, see N. Lamm, *Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition* (Northvale and London: Jason Aronson, 1990), pp. 39-75.
11. M.J. Bernstein, "The Orthodox Jewish Scholar and Jewish Scholarship: Duties and Dilemmas," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 3 (1991-92), pp. 8-36.
12. On the nexus of politics and archaeology, see N.A. Silberman, *Between Past and Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), especially pp. 87-136.
13. It is precisely this consideration that led to the inclusion of archaeology material in the *Da'at Mikra* series. Similarly, in the early 1960's, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, wrote a letter in which he addressed a proposal for a new Bible commentary—he had initially been asked to edit it—suggesting that archaeological material be included, while

cautioning that it should reflect nothing new, only presenting the traditional interpretations in new forms. The entire fascinating letter is printed in *Shaarei Emuna* (Jerusalem: Hekhal Menahem, 1991) pp. 174-77.

14. See B. Eichler, "Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, pp. 81-100.
15. W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 43-105.
16. *Guide for the Perplexed* 3.29-30. Rambam derived his information on ancient idolatry from South Arabian practices reported in a tenth century Arabic text. He portrays Abraham as throwing off the yoke of this pagan cult, the religion of the Sabeans. Note that Rambam was perfectly willing to read contemporary works about the ancient Near East and to use them to reconstruct the background of biblical literature. The historical inaccuracy of the accounts used by Rambam in no way detracts from the overarching hermeneutical approach he employed. See S. Pines's introduction to his translation of *The Guide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), cxxiii-cxxiv.
17. W.F. Albright and his students have been identified with what is incorrectly known as the maximalist position that accepts the basic historicity of the biblical narrative. See Albright's *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), *From Stone Age to Christianity* (second edition, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), and *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961).
18. The result of this approach, known as "minimalism," are summed up in I. Finkelstein and N.A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001).
19. Trans. J. K. Hoffmeier, in Hallo, *Context of Scripture* 2.40-41. The text describes the situation in Canaan in the thirteenth century B.C.E. with Israel alone pictured as a people without a geographical designation. This clearly refers to the period between the invasion and the actual settlement of the various Israelite tribes.
20. M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), 1.62-86. Cf. J. Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 29-44, which mistakenly sees Akhenaten, the monolatrous Egyptian ruler, as figuring in Manetho's Exodus traditions. Manetho's two different Exodus accounts cannot derive from the Bible as it was unavailable to him (the Septuagint came a century later), and so must reflect the ancient Egyptian "narrative" of Israel's departure from slavery in Egypt.
21. See J. K. Hoffmeir, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Hoffmeir does require an earlier date than most modern scholars accept, but one more in agreement with the traditional Jewish dating. See also E. S. Frerichs, L. H. Lesko eds., *The Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997).
22. Trans. A. Millard, in Hallo, *Context of Scripture* 2.161-2.

23. Trans. K. L. Younger, in Hallo, *Context of Scripture* 2.146-6.
24. *Mishna Pesahim* 4:9; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (Version A) 2.
25. An excellent resource is P.J. King and L.E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001).
26. D. Pardee, in Hallo, *Context of Scripture* 3.78-81.
27. See Y. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*: *The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 81-5. These falsely dyed fringes have played a role as color samples in attempts to prepare halakhically-valid *tekhelet* in modern times.
28. Y. Yadin, *Tefillin from Qumran* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Shrine of the Book, 1969).
29. See, for example, S. Fine, ed., *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). This volume is the catalogue of an exhibit that was organized by the Yeshiva University Museum.
30. While talmudic studies are beyond the scope of our discussion here, we should note that coins and other artifacts also shed light on rabbinic teachings—as with the unearthed two-part lamp on which was inscribed "*Shabbat*." In accord with the *Mishna* (*Shabbat* 2:4), a secondary source of oil had been attached, allowing it to burn longer. The Bar Kohkhba documents provide contracts, *ketubot* and *gittin*, with features conforming to mishnaic and talmudic mandates. See Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba*, pp. 222-53.