

*The United Monarchy of 10th Century Israel: An Assessment of the
Current Climate and Epigraphic Sources.*

There is seldom a more volatile topic in the disciplines of Biblical Studies and Archaeology as that of the historicity of the 10th century and the United Monarchy.¹ The story of David and Solomon in the Judeo Christian world seem to be as old as time itself. Yet the climate of the last 150 years having its root in higher criticism has climaxed into challenging the historicity of most of the Old Testament. It is in this acrimonious arena where I will seek to summarize the current state of affairs as it relates to the great debate. I will also seek to briefly highlight the Epigraphic Evidence showing that we do indeed have reason to accept the plausibility and reasonability of an historical United Monarchy of the 10th century.

Introduction

The great debate has come to be known as the *minimalists / maximalists*² debate. It's within these confines that a great amount of passion exhibits itself as those in both camps frequently throw epithets. The minimalists have reluctantly accepted the term *revisionist*,³ but have also been labeled as *nihilists*⁴ or even *deconstructionists*.⁵ The main issue revolves around the definition of history as well as understanding the process of historiography. There has been a definite shift in the nature of historiography as it relates to the ancient history of Israel. This bears itself out when doing a quick perusal of textbooks on ancient Israel.⁶ The enthusiastic challenge to the historical reliability of the

¹ Kallai, Zecharia "The United Monarchy of Israel- A Focal Point in Israelite Historiography."

² Shanks, Hershel. "Face to Face: Biblical Minimalists Meet their Challengers." *BAR* 23:04.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Hallo, William W. "A Context for the Biblical Account."

⁵ Dever, *What Did the Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*, 23-25.

⁶ It's evident that there began a definite shift from 60's and 70's (and prior) which held to a historiography that found the Bible valuable (Bright, John *History of Israel*; Wood, Leon *The United Monarchy*, 13-20, et.al) and those that find no valuable historicity (Coote, Robert B., *Early Israel*, 141-168; Grant, Michael *The History of Ancient Israel*, 96-110; Davies, Philip, *In Search of Ancient Israel*; Lemche, Neils Peter, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*.). For a discussion on the trend of Ancient Histories and where the minimalists desire them to go, see Thompson, Thomas L., "Gösta Ahlström's History of Palestine." *The*

Hebrew Scriptures began in the 1970s relating to the historicity of the patriarchs and has now shifted to the origins of Israel in Canaan during the 1980s and 1990s.⁷ In the past, the United Monarchy was something that unified historians and scholars, but it seems evident that this consensus has been shattered in the last few decades.⁸

Why such a grandiose paradigm shift in ancient histories of Israel? It is impossible to determine one single explanation, but Hoffmeier does offer some poignant insights into some of the probable reasons why this has taken place.⁹ His separate attempt at seeking to arrive at bona fide historical framework surrounding the Exodus has brought to the forefront the question of the methodologies used at arriving at a coherent history. The answer comes mainly from that which surrounds the study of historiography. What is history and what defines a balanced and even-handed approach? The concept of history has a variety of facets that must be addressed in seeking to understand what the goal is in seeking to arrive at one. Dever outlines at least eight different facets when seeking to cogently attempt the discipline of historiography. He mentions: 1) political history; 2) intellectual history; 3) socio-economic history; 4) technological history; 5) art history; 6) ideological history; 7) natural history; 8) culture or total history.¹⁰ Thus, any approach to history must recognize that the discipline is not as monolithic as some might have presumed.

Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström. Nevertheless, Ahlström's perspective and leaning on the Biblical sources for the United Monarchy period is called by Thompson "destructive" to his intention on writing a history (p. 433).

⁷ Hoffmeier, "Current Issues in Archaeology," 13.

⁸ Knoppers, Gary N., 19-22.

⁹ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 4-17.

¹⁰ Dever, *What Did the Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*, 5. He also comments that most biblical scholars who attempt to write histories are themselves not true historians, but instead theologians, p.6.

What then shall we do? Is it possible to arrive at any history of the period we are examining or is it all futile? Many scholars try to distinguish between a history of Israel and a biblical history of Israel, implying an insurmountable gap. It is common to read comments that the Bible provides absolutely nothing in contributing to a true Israelite history. Yet it goes beyond just minimizing the Bible as having any role. Davies comments that the “History of Israel: that genre is probably obsolete”¹¹ and that it is impossible to arrive at one “unless the historical counterpart is investigated independently of the biblical literature.”¹² This pre-supposition and bias towards the contribution the Bible might make is blatant and is hopefully doomed to failure in the wider academic world.¹³ Again, it reminds us of the double standard that some scholars might have in approaching history and its interrelation with the Scripture.

Another minimalist demonstrating hostility to any consulting of the biblical material is Niels Peter Lemche. He rejoices that this newfound paradigm minimizes the biblical text. He writes, “This new trend seems to be liberating the Bible from the tyranny of having to be historically accurate in the most minute detail in order to remain a Bible for Christians and Jews.”¹⁴ Now this might sound laudable, but in the end it reveals a prejudiced reaction to those who are seeking to approach all texts (biblical or not) with a consistent critical approach that is lacking by others. Both Lemche and Thompson are quite clear about what they assert. “Our argument is not that the Bible exaggerates the exploits of David, nor is it that Solomon was never as rich as the Bible makes him out to

¹¹ Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³ See Rainey, “The ‘House of David’ and the House of Deconstructionists,” *BAR* 20:6. As a world-class scholar, he states that it is reasonable to dismiss the pseudo intellectuality of the minimalists. It’s his hope that his dismissal permeates throughout the scholarly world.

¹⁴ Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, 1.

be. We are not dealing with issues of skepticism here. Rather, we are trying to argue that the Bible's stories of Saul, David and Solomon are not about history at all."¹⁵ This is one of the reasons why those in this camp are called nihilists.¹⁶

Another facet that sets this minimalist group apart from more conservative scholars is the affirmation that the writings of the mythical "history" found in the Hebrew Bible were redacted in the 2nd and/or 1st centuries B.C.¹⁷ This radical camp stands in contradistinction to the more centrist camp of Israel Finkelstein. He affirms the historicity of David and Solomon, certainly not as the Bible "exaggerates", but instead as local chieftains whose story was "codified (and in key respects composed) at an identifiable place and time: Jerusalem in the seventh century B.C.E."¹⁸ Those in the maximalist camp find themselves an unexpected ally as Finkelstein describes the revisionist's theory as having both logical and archaeological inconsistencies."¹⁹ He puts forth a more balanced approach in seeing from the literary evidence archaeological points of contact that are beyond anachronisms of Hellenistic scribes.

With an understanding of the general arguments from all sides, what exactly can we expect from archaeology and the material evidence in carrying us along towards a history of the United Monarchy? Are we grasping for the wind or can we approach the evidence within a framework that is helpful to our pursuit? It's important to recognize the limitations and affirmations that archaeology can provide. From the days of Albright and Wright, there has been the charge of seeking to use archaeology to prove the bible's

¹⁵ Lemche and Thompson, *Did Biran Kill David?*, 18.

¹⁶ Dever, William. "Whatchamacallit."

¹⁷ Shanks, Hershel. "Face to Face: Biblical Minimalists Meet their Challengers." *BAR* 23:04. See Kofoed for an assessment and critique showing that the methods used by those found in the "Copenhagen" school come up lacking when seeking to posit this 2nd century composition date.

¹⁸ Finkelstein & Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 5.

¹⁹ Finkelstein & Silberman, *David and Solomon*, 263.

historicity. This has been the reasonable critique of the minimalists for many years now. It is difficult to weave between archaeology as proof and archaeology as providing a context for a proper interpretation. Realizing that archaeological conclusions depend upon subjective interpretations of various factors, including one's disposition toward the Bible as a source of historical data, still doesn't minimize some using the "proof" terminology.²⁰ There are those on both sides that find themselves unfortunately trapped in a self-inflicted catch 22. When evaluating an excavated site that intersects with a biblical story, there have been those who perceive a contradiction between the material evidence and the text. Thus, the bible is proved wrong, because the archaeological evidence paints a different picture. David Merling has insightfully called this viewpoint to the carpet for asserting more than it intends. He writes, "The logic and corollary to this logic would be: the truthfulness of the biblical text has been disproved by archaeology; therefore, it is also possible that archaeology could have proved the truthfulness of the Bible. If this is not so, then the Bible suffers from double indemnity."²¹

Additionally, there are further complications to this line of reasoning; one of which is called the *fallacy of the negative proof*.²² This is probably the greatest mistake that minimalists make in their attempts at rejecting a history. According to them, there is no evidence of grand building projects or epigraphic considerations (Tell Dan inscription withstanding) that provide extra-biblical support for the United Monarchy. Thus, in their

²⁰ Yamuachi, "The Proofs, Problems, and Promises of Biblical Archaeology," 118.

²¹ Merling, 33.

²² Ibid.; see Steiner's article for a great example of this line of thinking. "David's Jerusalem: Fiction or Reality? It's Not There: Archaeology Proves a Negative." *BAR* 24:04.

worldview, this shows further that a genuine ancient history is not just improbable, but impossible.

It's important as we move toward an evaluation and assessment of the United Monarchy that we present upfront the framework that we will be operating from. We all have biases that will flavor our interpretations of the evidence, but acknowledging the potential blindness we might have should force us to delineate clear expectations. In seeking to establish whether the Hebrew Bible can stand up to archaeological scrutiny and demonstrate reliability, Kenneth Kitchen has noted that there are certain, "kinds of evidence that will play their part: explicit/direct and implicit/indirect. Both are valid, a fact not yet sufficiently recognized outside the various and highly specialized Near Eastern disciplines."²³ It is well known that there has not yet been discovered any direct evidence related to the United Monarchy. This has led some to fall headlong into the fallacy mentioned above.²⁴ Yet this doesn't leave us without seeking to develop a history based on plausibility and/or probability. We will seek to briefly examine the epigraphic evidence, not with the intent of validating the Bible, but instead to create an environment to properly evaluate the reasonability of the United Monarchy as it is presented in the text.²⁵

Before moving on to the epigraphic evidence, I would like to briefly mention the recent scholarship as it relates to the assessment of comparisons between Ugaritic (ancient Canaanite) and Hebrew poetry. These are important because "comparison of Hebrew poetic structures with ancient Canaanite models establishes the antiquity of those structures and of historical material associated with them.... Details of content show that

²³ Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 4.

²⁴ Gelinas, Margaret M., 227-228; also see Thompson, *Early History*, 312.

²⁵ Hallo, William W. "A Context for the Biblical Account."

the time span of the biblical Hebrew literary tradition runs from at least the eleventh century B.C.E. to the Persian period.”²⁶ This is just another piece of the puzzle that helps us evaluate the historicity of those writings that were claimed to be written by David and Solomon of the 10th century.

Epigraphic Evidence

Before delving into the various epigraphic evidences, it behooves us to briefly address the question of why there has not been more inscriptions discovered that correspond to the United Monarchy. To ask this begs the question of why we would even have such expectations. There are at least three plausible reasons:

1) Jerusalem has suffered repeated changes, destructions, and rebuildings on the grand scale; and even after 130 years, very little has been excavated; 2) It is possible that many stelae would have been reused; 3) Understanding that ancient times in the land of Israel differed sharply than let’s say of Egypt where there are copious inscriptions. There have been scant discoveries in the land of Israel (Samaria) and the surrounding nation-states such as Aram-Damascus, Moab, and kings of Byblos, Tyre and Sidon.²⁷ It is within this vacuum of expectation that we should be thrilled to have those epigraphic evidences that have been discovered.

The El-Amarna Letters (ca. 1350 B.C.)

It might seem interesting why we would start with the El-Amarna Letters from Egypt. One of the claims of the minimalists is that immediately preceding the settlement of Israel there was no town or city of Jerusalem.²⁸ Further, because they assert that there

²⁶ Fenton, 386-409.

²⁷ Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 90-91.

²⁸ Steiner, “David’s Jerusalem: Fiction or Reality? It’s Not There: Archaeology Proves a Negative.” *BAR* 24:04. This is just one example. It almost seems an axiom when examining the minimalist literature.

hasn't been a major archaeological discovery that coincides with the stories mentioned in the Bible of extensive building projects (mainly by Solomon), the conclusion is that these stories are patently false. The Amarna letters paint quite a different picture. They were written in the lingua franca of Babylonian (Akkadian) and "provide our only substantial information on the amorphous period of the 14th century B.C."²⁹

According to these tablets, Jerusalem was a seat of a king (or mayor/governor) nominated by the pharaoh. He lived in a palace and there existed an Egyptian garrison of about 50 soldiers, which was temporarily stationed there. The city of Jerusalem in the Egyptian province of Canaan was similar to that of other lowland Canaanite city-states. There have been some archaeological discoveries from this period. Only a handful of Late Bronze II pottery and a few building fragments were unearthed as well as a possible 19th dynasty Egyptian stele north of the temple mount.³⁰ Based on this lack of evidence one would assume that the "text" is wrong.

Along the same lines is the city of Taanach. There is textual evidence of a city, but the archaeological finds have not affirmed the assertions of the text. One could also discuss the city of Megiddo. The texts mention a city or defensive wall, but none yet has been found corresponding to the Late Bronze period.³¹

The intent of mentioning the Amarna letters was to demonstrate that we have texts declaring a city state presence in Jerusalem with very little archaeological evidence

²⁹ Matthews, Victor H. "El-Amarna Texts," 358.

³⁰ Na'aman, "The Contribution of the Amarna Letters," 19-20. Also see Gabriel Barkay, "What's an Egyptian Temple Doing in Jerusalem?" He mentions that there has been found near or in Jerusalem a fragment of a stele with a hieroglyphic inscription, two Egyptian alabaster vessels, an Egyptian serpentine statuette, an offering table and architectural fragments—therefore he concludes that there was probably an Egyptian temple here in the Late Bronze Age. All these point to the fact that Jerusalem in the 10th century would have been a reasonable and realistic city for David to make as his own capital.

³¹ Naaman, "David's Jerusalem: Fiction or Reality? It Is There: Ancient Texts Prove It." *BAR* 24:04.

to affirm this. This is a classic example of why it is important to avoid dogmatism when making assertions from non-evidence.

The Merneptah Stele (ca. 1209 B.C.)

Much of the accusations made against a history of ancient Israel stem from the fact that there are scant attestations found within the epigraphy of her neighbors. This is why it is important to begin at a time prior to the period we ultimately desire to analyze. The Merneptah Stele is one of these that provide epigraphic evidence. The New Kingdom of Egypt rose to a place of prominence and wealth that lasted longer under Ramesses II than any other known Pharaoh. His son Merneptah continued in this tradition even though he came to the throne at a later age. He campaigned into the land of Canaan and commemorates his victory over the various entities in his stele. It is here that the name of Israel appears along with three other foreign lands that were conquered by Merneptah.³² All three names mentioned were given with a foreign land determinative while Israel was given a foreign people group determinative. Kitchen comments that Ashkelon would have represented the coast, Gezer the inlands east of the coastal plain, and Yenoam signified the Galilee region. Thus, the foreign people determinative for Israel would have had them located in the only remaining geographical area, that of the hill country which is consistent with what the Bible affirms.³³ Additionally, he demolishes attempts by those in the minimalist camp to assert that the name Israel should be translated as something else entirely. The facts as it relates to New Kingdom grammar and epigraphy allow for no other option.

³² Kitchen, "The Controlling Role of External Evidence in Assessing the Historical Status of the Israelite United Monarchy," 112-113.

³³ Kitchen, "Victories of Merenptah," 272.

Following along these lines is the breakthrough discovery at Karnak temple. Underneath the Seti II reliefs were discovered a series of battles that, after much analysis, turn out to be a pictorial representation of the campaigns found in the Merneptah stele. The conclusion was that the scenes of Israel corresponded well with early Israel's geopolitical reality.³⁴ This demonstrates from the archaeological record that there is epigraphic evidence evincing a foreign people group named Israel living in the land of Canaan at least by the end of the 13th century. It has been alleged that the Iron Age I period after Merneptah is one that is considered a dark age. Yet it is important to realize that the major regional powers had been broken and replaced with an epoch of "mini-empires." This provides a reasonable understanding as to why there is minimal amount of archaeological inscriptions during this period.

The Mesha Stela (810 B.C.³⁵)

The Moabite Stone or Mesha stele was discovered in 1868 and is well known for mentioning, in the ancient Moabite dialect,³⁶ quite a few biblically important statements. In describing that the land of Moab has been subjugated by Israel, it also mentions that the men of Gad have been living in Ataroth since the days of old. This provides an interesting link in connection with various models of early Israelite settlements.³⁷ It also mentions by name the Israelite God Yahweh, the reign of king Omri, "his son", "his house," and 11 other biblical place names.³⁸

³⁴ Hoffmeier, *"Israel in Sinai,"* 244-245.

³⁵ Lemaire, "Hebrew and West Semitic Inscriptions and Pre-Exilic Israel."

³⁶ McCarter, Kyle P. Jr. "The Divided Monarchy," 144.

³⁷ Kallai, "The King of Israel and the House of David," 248. See this brief article for some decent insights into the questions of the terms being used (house of David, House of Omri, etc.).

³⁸ Lemaire, "Hebrew and West Semitic Inscriptions and Pre-Exilic Israel."

The important thing about the Mesha Stele to our discussion here was elucidated in 1994 when André Lemaire examined it afresh. What he found was a similarity to that which had been discovered in 1993 in the Tel Dan inscription. He found the word *bt* followed by an incomplete word *vd*. He reconstructed this phrase by adding a single consonant and reasonably concluded that this was another independent mention of the “house of David.”³⁹ So based on his restoration, there are now two 9th century references to the “house of David” being found in the inscriptions of the Levant.⁴⁰

The Tel Dan Stele (ca. 850 B.C.)

The Tel Dan Stele was found in secondary use in the remains of a wall by archaeologists in 1993 and has been dated to the first half of the 9th century B.C.⁴¹ An inscription had been found that read in old Aramaic, “house of David.” It has shown itself to be one of the most controversial and debated discoveries in the past few decades. Soon after it’s publication there were many published on some of the potentially exciting ramifications.⁴² This was quickly followed by a highly critical piece of these initial articles as well as anyone who showed any enthusiasm that this could be a genuine indirect archaeological reference to the person of David.⁴³ The decade that followed provided scores of articles that again sought to bring some harmony to a debate that showed itself to be quite acrimonious.⁴⁴

³⁹ Lemaire, “‘House of David’ Restored in Moabite Inscription.” *BAR* 20:03.

⁴⁰ For alternative interpretation and restoration contra Lemaire, see Na’aman, “‘King Mesha and the Foundation of the Moabite Monarchy.’”

⁴¹ Lipinski, *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II*, 83.

⁴² Ahituv & Kallai, Zecharia. “The King of Israel and the House of David.”

⁴³ Lemche & Thompson, “Did Biran Kill David?”

⁴⁴ For some relevant highlights of the various positions throughout the 90s and beyond see Halpern, “The Stela from Dan: Epigraphic and Historical Considerations,” (1994); Rendsburg, (1995); Lemaire, “The Tel Dan Stela as a Piece of Royal Historiography,” (1998); Na’aman, “Three Notes on the Aramaic Inscription from Tel Dan,” (2000); Sasson, (2005).

Those that reject a “house of David” rendering have offered quite a few different interpretations of what the phrase **בֵּית דָּוִד** should be. The contrary offerings are that phrase means: 1) a temple;⁴⁵ 2) beloved;⁴⁶ 3) epithet of Yahweh;⁴⁷ 4) toponym;⁴⁸ 5) cult god of Moab.⁴⁹ It seems quite evident that the minimalists will go to great lengths to avoid the most normal rendering of the phrase. One of the most comical is that of the creation of a deity named Dod in order to avoid the aspects of the inscription denoting “House of David.” Unfortunately there is not one piece of evidence in the Bible or in the ancient Near East that resembles this god; No temples, altars, inscriptions, rituals, statutes, etc.⁵⁰ In summary, the discovery of the Tel Dan Stele, as well as the Moabite Stone, has provided us with 9th century evidence that the house of David existed sufficiently enough to warrant two mentions by neighboring enemies on royal stelae. This provides indirect evidence in helping us to evaluate the stories mentioned in the Bible.

Possible Mention of David in the Shishak List (ca. 925 B.C.)

One of the most important possibilities within the epigraphic material available has as its source the story of Pharaoh Shishak’s campaign into the land of Israel where he defeated Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25). Apart from the Biblical text there are five possible

⁴⁵ Lemche & Thompson, “Did Biran Kill David?,” 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁷ Barstad, 495.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Davies, “*BYTDWD* and *SWKT DWYD*: A Comparison.” Also, see Thompson for a summary of these possibilities, “House of David: An Eponymic Referent to Yahweh as Godfather.” It is interesting to note that Thompson intimates that Biran has not been forthright in conveying the circumstances surrounding the discovery. To impugn his integrity and cry forgery demonstrate the willingness of the minimalists to ignore the evidence (see Devers, “What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?,” 29-30.

⁵⁰ Kitchen, “Possible Mention of David in the Late 10th Century B.C. and Deity Dod as Dead as the Dodo,” 41.

witnesses that is to be found outside of this corpus.⁵¹ What Dr. Kitchen has discovered is that within the source found at Karnak is a long list of Palestinian place names. Many of these can be clearly identified with locations in Israel, Judah, the southern desert (Negev), and a few on the other side of the Jordan.

One of these that are obviously located by proximity to the Negev/Judah area is called the “heights of *Dwt*.”⁵² Based on grammatical considerations during the 10th century, Kitchen has reasoned that this indeed is a reference to a geographical location in southern Judah/Negev known as the highlands of David.⁵³

Hence the probability that this epigraphic evidence presents to us another indirect reference to this figure known as David is high. If this turns out to be true, then this would be the oldest indirect reference not more than 50 years after David apparently died in 970 B.C.

Conclusion

When delving into the debate surrounding the United Monarchy it doesn't take long to realize that there is an abundance of material available that helps us to make a lucid assessment on the material found in the text of the Hebrew Bible. We have sought to briefly survey the current debate as well as provide some of the more pertinent epigraphic evidence used in examining the historicity of the United Monarchy. The fact that this evidence is only a narrow reflection of the various approaches can be seen in the extended bibliography. The scope of this paper could have been multiplied many times over if we sought to further the debate by addressing the relevant material of the

⁵¹ Kitchen, “Ancient Egypt and the Hebrew Monarchies: A Review Article,” 44.

⁵² Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 93.

⁵³ Kitchen, “Possible Mention of David in the Late 10th Century B.C. and Deity Dod as Dead as the Dodo.” 40-41.

archaeology of Jerusalem, Radio-metric Dating, Iron-Age Chronology, Literacy in the Iron Age, and the archaeology of Edom.

Needless to say, this endeavor hopefully has provided a fruitful assessment of the current debate as well as an examination of the epigraphic evidence currently available. The topic of the historicity of David, Solomon, and the United Monarchy is not going away any time soon.

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