



Entrevista a Israel Finkelstein

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Israel Finkelstein, archaeologist and Israelite historian, is the director of the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Tel Aviv and he is also the co-director of the Megiddo works. He is co-author, with Neil Asher Silberman, of *The Bible Unearthed, Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (2001).

Which are the objectives of your research?

All my studies have the objective of being able to give a global vision of the history. Besides, in the case of Israel, we also work with written texts and try to study them from a historical and archaeological point of view. This way, Archaeology is an independent source for the reconstruction of history.

I pretend my work to be didactic and broadcasted. I try to work in a critical way, allowing Archaeology to be more than a simple confirmation of Biblical theories; rather the opposite, it is the central point of any research, although not the only one, since both anthropology and ethnoarchaeological studies have served to elaborate new theories and researches.

Which is your main methodology and how important is archaeology in it?

My methodology is based on the way we face our work in order to obtain materials which allow the most precise study possible.

An example of this methodology is the works that we have been carrying out in Negev, where some geological, geographical, geomorphologic and climatic studies were done before facing the archaeological work (where we include stratigraphic, archaeo-zoological and mineralogical studies), of an Iron Age society. All this analysis allowed us to delimit the object of study. Besides, we used the ceramic typology to date the site.

The analysis on the sediments gives us information of the ancient economy and the ancient climate. Besides, the influence of ethnoarchaeology to study the region of Negev or how some sedentary Bedouin groups became nomadic is very important: it has demonstrated that, in some occasions, the change from nomadism to the sedentarism is not lineal.

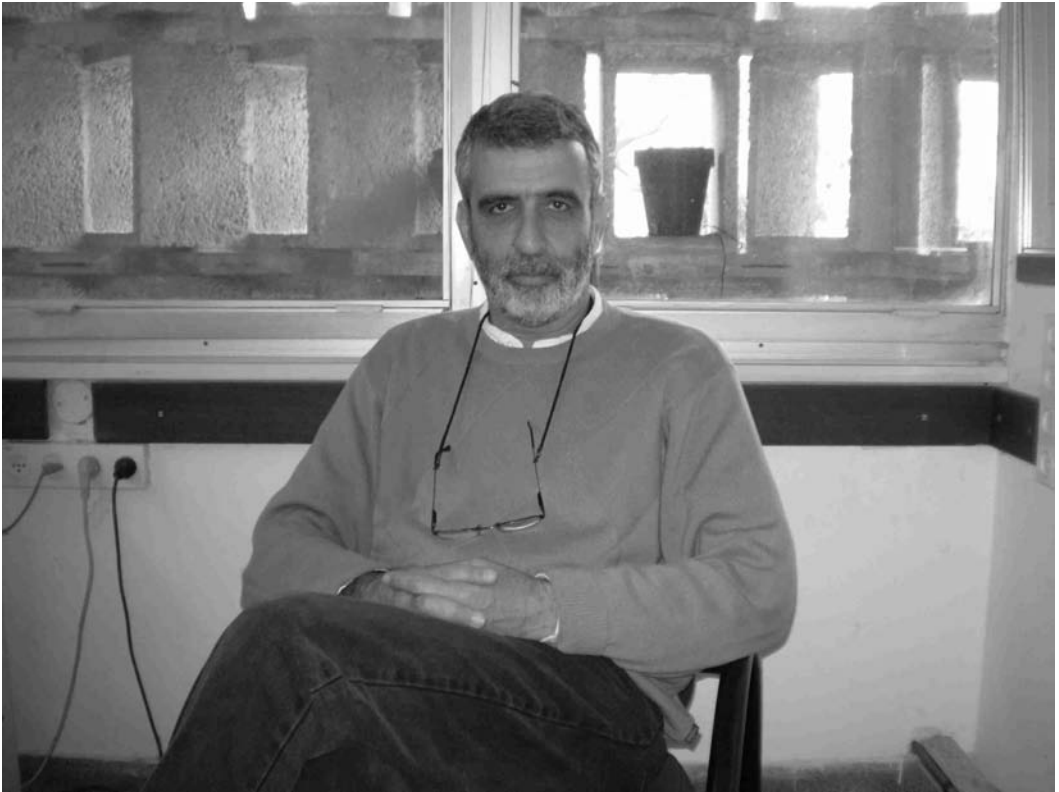
What do you think about the fact that, in Israel, you have written documents? Has it made things easier or more difficult?

This question is more complicated than it seems,

because it is not simple to face any investigation, but it is even harder to do so in such a convulsed zone and with so many History as Israel. Having written documents, specially the Biblical texts, can be helpful since in Israel the written tradition has remained tied to the archaeological material like in no other part of the world. But this situation also can be undeniably harmful, as many archaeologists and historians have said, because the Biblical writings predetermine the

research.

Nevertheless, I am more of a historian who uses Archaeology to find the answers that arise from the research and so I consider the studies on the Bible and on other parallel sources of knowledge to be also important, as they allow us to compare them and see the different points of view. We will never look down on them, but we must also be aware of them, here is where Archaeology can help us.



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researcher. Some of them have used Archaeology in order to reinforce the texts with the archaeological material. This causes that questions are no longer formulated to that material as it was already explained before we found it. This process culminates in justifying or ignoring the manipulations in the historical interpretation. This does not have to be our way of working if we want to make a rigorous archaeological

Which degree of historical truth do you think has David and Salomon dynasty?

David's lineage is a historical reality. Some written sources corroborate it, like the existing in foreign nations as Egypt. The kingdoms of David and Salomon would actually have been chiefdoms of the south zone of the Israel of the Iron Age, so far from the idea of a State with a central

administration and with a unified culture. But the creation of the dynastic myth by the deuteronomist history modified the memories of this past, turning it into a glorious past and the union of both Israel and Judah. This approached closer to the interests of a Judaic king who ruled in the 7th century B.C in northern Israel, Josiah, than to the social reality of these prominent figures.

You are critical about believing in a mythological kingdom of Salomon. Which are your reasons?

As I have said before, we do not doubt about the existence of David or Salomon, but it's erroneous to think about a glorious kingdom and a unified monarchy which implies both Israel and Judah, as have been told by the deuteronomist history.

First of all, it is erroneous (but not false) to think about the great State developed by Salomon, with big monumental works like Megiddo or Jasor, which at first were claimed to show the existence of an organized plan for the remodelling of the cities during this period, but, later on, it has been verified that the chronology of these works cannot be previous to the 10th BC. Secondly, there is some imaginative points in the treatment of Salomon's figure, which is more similar to a great Assyrian king than to a chief in a poor Judah. This shows which the reality of the 7th century BC was and which the intentions of the king Josiah were.

Which is your most important criticism about deuteronomist history?

The deuteronomist history is the result of the manipulation carried out during the reign of King Josiah in order to justify his imperialistic interests in the 7th B.C.

It came out to defend the idea that Hebrew people were unified by God from its origins and this process came to his summit with the Davidic dynasty in the 10th century. At this time, they would be a united kingdom, whose capital was Jerusalem (Judah) and the South was its most

important part; a kingdom with a very significant international role; his inhabitants were all faithful to YHWH and were part of a developed State, author of big public- works. None of these affirmations can be sustained archaeologically, especially because Jerusalem was a small village back in the 10th century BC, without any sign of richness. It was not until the 8th century BC, when the refugees of the destroyed kingdom of Israel (North) migrated to Judah and started growing the city of Jerusalem, which up to that moment did not have walls, because of its population multiplied.

In addition, Salomon's big works in Megiddo and other cities have been dated in the 9th century BC, not during his government. And the worship to only one god makes no sense compared with the polytheistic tradition of these peoples up to the arrival of the Jewish orthodoxy (introduced during Josiah's kingdom) and the attempt of union under one god, with the construction of the temple in Jerusalem.

The deuteronomist is an attempt of historical, ideological, political and religious unification in front a very concrete historical situation, the fall of Assyria and the increase of the power of Judah's aristocracy, which wanted to extend his domain over the north, with the Assyrian empire debilitated.

What kind of relation do you think it was between Canaan people and Israelite people before 10th century BCE?

According to Archaeology, the emergence of the Israelites is the result of the Canaan collapse, their origins are in Canaan; and they are socioeconomic reasons, far from what invasionists' theories have said.

The first Israelite communities of the 12th century BCE were nomadic shepherds from Canaan who established themselves in the high zones of the mountains, isolated, without an administrative organization or an agricultural base. During the third big wave of settling the high lands, these nomadic people turned into

sedentary farmers. This fluctuation between a sedentary or nomadic way of life was habitual in that zone and was a consequence of the political, economic or climatic situation of the societies of that region, since the nomads highly depended on the agricultural cities of Canaan for their survival -due to the poor nutritional variety of his form of life- and they needed grain in exchange for meat products.

The collapse of Canaanite communities - probably due to the invasion of that zone by the Sea peoples in the 12th century BC- forced the nomads to establish permanently in order to be able to obtain more sources of food.

Is this change of socioeconomic structure normal or is it an exception?

As I have said before, the change of socioeconomic structure is very normal in the zone of the Near East. Not only for the Bronze Age or the Iron Age, but also in the 19th and 20th century A.D. This is the case of the Bedouins, who returned to a nomadic way of life in order to escape from the political and economic pressure of the Ottoman Empire. Again, History does not follow predetermined ways, rather the opposite; communities adapt to the circumstances.

Can we speak, already in the 12th century BCE, of an Israelite culturally differentiated community but without any political union?

Yes, since the appearance of the Merneptah Stela we know the existence of communities culturally identified as Israel, but without one political organization, as we know from the study of the archaeological material.

For example, the practice of not eating pork is the most ancient vestige of the Israelite culture and it has archaeological validity. All the communities around did eat pork, so this means we have to refuse the idea of porcine diseases as the main reason. Israelites were the only ones that were not eating pork; until now, no one has

found evidences of pork consumption in any archaeological site.

I believe that the main reason is an ideological reason and I think it could be seen as an attempt to become different from the rest of the communities and a way to enforce social cohesion, where the taboo is very powerful.

Do you think that Biblical Archaeology should have political consequences?

No, I think that it should not have to be like that. I have taken many academic discussions about my way of facing my researches, but politics has always been kept aside.

Your research is pretty polemical with Zionist political basis. Have you suffered any reaction/problem in that way? And how these reactions have affected your research?

No, I am Zionist, but my political opinions have not affected my research, and, in the same way, I have never had any political or external influence in my work. In reference to your question, I do not believe Archaeology, compared to the Biblical texts, could open a debate on the right of occupation of the land.

History is in constant change and the question of national identities has nothing to do with a historical or chronological problematic, which can be manipulated.

Now Israel is a reality, even though we all know that Exodus didn't really exist in a historical way, since we have not got any empirical proof, as a lot of investigations have demonstrated. But all these things don't mean that Israel does not exist today.

For example, a few days ago we have celebrated the Pesaj, which is the commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. It is part of our culture and I celebrated it with my family, but this does not mean that we should not separate tradition and research. There is no contradiction. In your country you celebrate the Pasqua, even if you are not a believer; it is a part of your traditions. The same thing happens here.

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