

Is the Bible right?

- The debate on the authenticity of the Bible echoes in the research of archaeologists, historians and scientists, who seek to prove that the Bible was right or that it is fiction.
- Besides the mediation between faith and science, which is crucial for explaining the content of the Bible in light of scientific discoveries and progress, the focus of historians and archaeologists is the historical authenticity of the Biblical narrative.
- Specifically, archaeology in Israel aims at investigating the story of the Land in order to draw conclusions on the veracity of Biblical references. Therefore, archaeological evidence citing the Biblical Kings or reporting Biblical law show that what the Bible tells really happened.
- However, the historical analysis, as well as the comparison with other historical sources, often distinguishes between the fact, which happened, and the narration, which often includes fiction or myths.
- To prove that the Bible was historically right also means to recognise the central role that the Land of Israel plays in Jewish identity and, consequently, to recognise the legitimacy of Jewish claims on Jerusalem and Israel.
- Controversies regarding archaeological and historical research on the Bible involve religious and political sensibilities. For instance, Jewish ultra-Orthodox oppose archaeological excavation on potential burial sites. Christian authorities often disregard archaeological and historical evidence that may show the inauthenticity of religious site. Moreover, Palestinians falsely accuse Israel of planning to destroy the al-Aqsa mosque by excavating in the Tunnel along the Western Wall Temple Mount.
- The proof of the Biblical veracity stemming from historical and archaeological evidence is also important to counteract the Palestinian attempt to disregard Jewish history as fabricated.

IC interviewed Dan Bahat, archaeologist and professor at the University of Bar-Ilan. After graduating in archaeology from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Dan Bahat travelled to Italy for visiting the mosaics of Ravenna, where he first studied Italian. He worked with prof. Yigael Yadin in Massada and subsequently became archaeologist in Jerusalem, specialising in the Medieval history of the city.

Interview with Dan Bahat

Archaeologist, University of Bar Ilan



There are people who believe the Bible is a myth, while others believe instead that the Bible is a historical book. As an archaeologist would you say that the Bible was right?

I believe one can say with a certain level of certainty that the Bible is right, but one has first to understand what the Bible says. There are several books in the Bible; the historical books, together with other records, are confirmed by archaeological discoveries. And here, another problem: one has also to understand that our perspective is different.

For instance, Joseph Flavius wrote about Masada, the fortress in the Judean desert where Herod the Great had built wonderful palaces. In his books, the Jewish historian describes the beauty of the Western palace in Masada. However, the building he described was actually the Northern palace, because when he wrote he was situated in the Western part of the fortress.

This is one example of how the historical perspective changes, and we have to be aware of this in our work.

Therefore the Bible is not a myth.

There are however other parts of the Bible which may be considered a myth. I believe for instance that the Genesis is a tradition, a myth, as it is in other cultures. However, there are biblical references that find historical evidence in other records, including the Egyptian historical texts, such as the story of Israelis coming to this land in the 13th century B.C., or the twelve tribes of Israel. On top of that, there is also fictional narrative. Think of the story of Troy: it is true that the Dorics expelled the Ionics, but the rest of the story was narrated and became the Greek myth.

Are there proofs that King David really existed?

Yes, there are. King David existed and he was a great king, as the Bible tells. There is the archaeological site of Tel Dan in the Galilee. Tel Dan is a city mentioned in the Bible as the last city on the Northern border of the Kingdom of Israel. There is a stele narrating of the Aramean victory over the Israelis, referred to as "the Abode of David". There is no doubt King David really existed.

But there is also myth around King David.

Near Bet Shemesh, there is the archaeological site of Khirbet Qeiyafa, with ruins of a fortified city with two gates, dating back to the 10th century B.C. The Bible tells of the fight between David and Goliath in a circular camp, as is the structure of the city, like Hazor and Gezer. The city had two gates, while at the time there was just one gate, which confirms what the Bible tells about the

Philistines fleeing from one of the two gates of the city. There is enough evidence to show that this is the site described in the Book of Samuel.

There is also an ostrakon that was found in the same site with Hebrew inscriptions such as “protect the poor and the slave”, “worship God”, which is the social law of the Bible. Evidently, it was a city annexed to the Kingdom of David, to which the Jewish law was extended.

The most controversial place for archaeological studies is maybe Jerusalem. Is the attachment of the Jewish people to Jerusalem also a myth?

It is not a myth. Jerusalem has always been at the centre of the Jewish people. One has to start from the Bible, where the name of the city originally was “Yerushalem”. The second book of Kings tells that King Hezekiah, who reigned at the end of the 8th century b.C. and is also remembered in Jesus’ genealogy in the Gospel. King Hezekiah was an important figure since he rebelled against the Assyrians and for the religious reforms he introduced.

The Bible tells that King Hezekiah doubled the size of the city of Jerusalem, building also on the Western hill, where there is now the Armenian quarter in the old city. Therefore, “Yerushalem” has become “Yerushalaym”, in the dual form, which indicates a couple.

Many people think though that the Bible is a myth and likewise do not believe that archaeological evidence is real.

In the 1920s, historians would tell that the patriarchs never existed. It is true that many people today think that there is no evidence, but everywhere you go in Israel, you can find reference in the Bible.

There are researchers who try to give a rational explanation of what the Bible tells. Werner Keller’s study “The Bible was right”, written in 1950s, describes what the plagues of Egypt were and what actually happened. The focus of my work is different: I want to understand the story of the country, to discover the evidence that show the historical truth of the Bible.

What are the most important discoveries in Jerusalem?

The archaeologist Eilat Mazar has found a public building, which she called David’s palace, an entire administrative quarter near the Temple Mount, including jars and inscriptions. The archaeologist Avigad, in 1970s, proved that the size Jerusalem included also the Western hill. The city of David, described as magnificent and rich, was actually little in size. Avigad found the walls built by Hezekiah and other treasures dating back to the Biblical era. Following these discoveries, we have completely changed the knowledge regarding the Jerusalem of the Bible.

Why have you specialised in the story of Jerusalem?

Something really “sad” happened. I was first interested in the Iron and Bronze Age, when I started working for the State as an archaeologist. Prof. Avi Yonah had at the time built the model of the Second Temple. It was in 1964, when Jerusalem was occupied by the Jordanians and we had no access to the Old City, so he referred to evidence collected before 1948, to the Bible and other historians, such as Josephus Flavius. I was fascinated. After Jerusalem was liberated, I decided to pursue a PhD and I was intentioned to write about Egyptian ceramics – I still remember the hieroglyphics! But then I was suggested to write about Jerusalem. I had just discovered an old church built by the Crusaders, which hosted a laboratory of wrought iron. I wrote an article about it on the journal of the Dominicans, the “Revue Biblique”, which happened to be the first article

regarding Jerusalem at the time of the Crusaders. Thus, I specialised in Middle Age, studying Islam and Christianity.

What happened to the church?

The Italian government paid for the restoration of the church, which now hosts the offices of the Palestinian university of Al Quds.

Jerusalem is also important for its Christian sites, the veracity of which is also controversial. How are the relations with the Catholic Church?

I always say that almost no place is authentic, but this has not influenced the relations with the Catholic Church. Christians experience Jerusalem both the emotionally, such as the Way of the Cross, and historically, although not all places are authentic.

However, I maintain that the Holy Sepulchre is indeed authentic. I believe that Jesus was crucified there, since there is no evidence proving the contrary. The Holy Sepulchre is located in a place that at the time was outside the walls, so it is possible that the Romans designated that location to executions. Moreover, six sepulchres of the same period were found, and this confirms that the place was located outside the city, as burial regulations of Jewish law prescribe.

I also met the pope John Paul the Second, during which we also talked about archaeology. We spoke in Polish. I was born to a Polish family and after the Shoah, an aunt who survived the camps came to live with us, so at home we spoke Polish.

The Tunnel along the Temple Mount's Western Wall constitute maybe the most controversial issues in archaeology, causing Palestinian anger. Why are the excavations controversial?

In December, I published a book on the Tunnel, which will trigger a huge debate in Israel because I argue that Jews have started praying there only a few centuries ago.

Zerah Warhaftig, Minister of Religious Affairs, decided in 1967 to continue the archaeological excavations started before the 1948 war – under Jordanian occupation, Jews had no access to the Old City. The Arabs then accused Israel of planning to destroy the Dome of the Rock. The Arab press published cartoons portraying Israelis excavating under the Dome of the Rock in terms that reminded the pictures published in the Nazi newspaper Der Stuermer.

Zionism gave renewed importance to archaeology because it provides evidence showing the Jews have always been here.

Why is the Tunnel important from an historical point of view?

The Tunnel is very important: we discovered evidence going back to the First and Second Temples, the Byzantine era, the Crusaders and the Mamluks. Moreover, there is ancient architecture and all the treasures of Herod are being discovered. Archaeology is important because it shows the truth.

But the Arabs argue that Jerusalem is Muslim.

Arabs assert that Jews have never been here and that the Temple has never existed. According to the Islamic tradition, the Temple Mount is the place where Muhammad ascended to Paradise and therefore there are two mosques.

Jerusalem acquired the current Muslim aspect only under Mamluk domination, where the Mamluks sent to exile rebels and opponents – Jerusalem was for them what Siberia was for the Soviets, basically. Jerusalem has never had any religious or national significance for Muslims.

So Jerusalem is Jewish?

Jerusalem has never been the capital of any other nation but the Jewish nation, and we have the proofs!

Archaeology has also a political task?

I don't think so. There is no politics in archaeology.

However, whenever someone moves a stone in Jerusalem, there is a debate on historical belonging and "ownership" of the city.

Excavations serve one only purpose: knowing the city. The archaeologists who worked in Jerusalem are all famous, and they become part of the history together with the city. There is no politics in this. Palestinians oppose archaeological research because they do not want the Jewish past of Jerusalem to come out. They deny that Jerusalem is Jewish and claim that Jewish claims on the land are a myth.

For example, Israel has built a wooden bridge for acceding to the Temple Mount, since the hill was collapsing. Arabs then accused us that we wanted to destroy the al-Aqsa mosque. After restoration works, the government decided to remove the bridge and they still say that our purpose is to destroy al-Aqsa.

The idea that Jewish history and claims are a myth is getting support abroad?

When we found new evidence dating back to the period of King David, some "new archaeologists", who have adopted the same ideology as the "new historians", from UK and Denmark sought to claim they were false.

These archaeologists have endorsed the Palestinian narrative and claim we have destroyed the area because we focus only on Jewish history. And there is nothing as false! Indeed, the greatest experts of Islamic history, art and archaeology are Israelis. The Ben-Gurion University in the Negev publishes the Middle-East studies journal "Jama'a"; the Oriental Society in Israel focuses research on Islam with several publications and research projects. Jerusalem hosts one of the most important museums on Islam.

There are people who claim that Israeli archaeologists pursue a political agenda in their research.

Some years ago, I taught an entire course in university on the Dome of the Rock. Muslims believe it is the place where Muhammad visited Jerusalem, but this is not supported by any historical evidence or record. Arabs claim that the Temple has never existed, and that the Jews have invented everything. The truth is that we want to know this land also through archaeology, but one cannot deny the simple historical evidence that Jerusalem has always been Jewish.