

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 57 (2001)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** History, Archaeology, and the Bible  
**Autor:** Knauf, Ernst Axel  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877973>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 03.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# History, Archaeology, and the Bible\*

## *1. The Problem*

The dialogue between biblical scholars and archaeologists of Israel/Palestine will not and should not ever end. Their common ground is history. It goes without saying that archaeology aims at (re)constructing history. It is equally evident that the Bible frequently refers to what we would call history, i.e. past events; it is equally evident that the Bible is a cultural artefact produced within a specific society during a certain period and may tell the historian something about that society and this period. The dialogue between archaeologists and biblicists is, however, constantly endangered by a communicative breakdown (as is, by the way, the discourse about «history» within the circle of biblical scholars). One reason for the mutual misunderstanding seems to be the fact that various people mean quite different things by the terms «Bible», «history», and «archaeology». It is the purpose of the present contribution to clarify some of these differences.

«Bible» is the term most simply to define, even though «Bible» exists in a variety of bibles. Together, they constitute a basic, if not the basic, source-text of western, Judeo-Christian civilization. There is the Jewish Bible, or Tenakh, which comprises the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. Then there is the Christian Bible<sup>1</sup>, which contains a New Testament and a re-arranged and amplified Tenakh; rearranged into the sequence of Historical Books (comprising both the Torah and the Former Prophets), Poetical (or Didactical) Books and Prophetical Books (the Later Prophets and Daniel from the «Writings»), and amplified by such pieces of decent ancient Jewish literature as 1 Maccabees, Sirach, Tobit and Judit. Third (and not last), there is a hybrid or Protestant Bible which pretends to return, as far as the «Old Testament» is concerned, to the Hebrew truth, but still preserves the christian rearrangement of that truth. The problem area «Bible and History» is created by the Christian canon with its category of «historical biblical books». For the Jewish tradition, it is not necessarily a problem whether the Torah was received by Moses on Mount Sinai, or created by Esra the Scribe after the Babylonian Exile, or a group of scribes publishing under that name, as long as one keeps the Torah; and a reading of the Prophets as a commentary on the Torah is not necessarily

\* A response to H.M. Niemann, *Von Oberflächen, Schichten und Strukturen. Was leistet die Archäologie für die Erforschung der Geschichte Israels?*, to be published in a forthcoming volume of the proceedings of the «Alttestamentliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft»

<sup>1</sup> Minor differences between the Greek, Latin, Ethiopian and other Christian Bibles disregarded; cf. L.K. Handy, *The Educated Person's Thumbnail Introduction to the Bible*, St. Louis 1997, 1-15.

interested whether the paragraph read is a record of something that had actually happened or had actually been said by the prophet under whose name the book is issued, or a midrash produced by another group of anonymous scribes.

In a scholarly sense, «Bible» is the sum of everything regarded as such by any group adhering to one of the bibles. In a practical sense, within the limitations imposed by an interest to study the history of Israel/Palestine in the first millennium BCE, «Bible» is restricted to those books in which one might expect source material from that period, but not necessarily in their Hebrew form only<sup>2</sup>. The scholarly interest in the Bible is limited to its character as an artefact deriving from the past<sup>3</sup>; as opposed to inscriptions, it is, however, always questionable how much of the Bible derives from which past, and was produced at exactly what place, establishing the problem area «Bible and history» as a distinct sub-category within the problem area «doing history with texts»

As for the relations between archaeology and history, a brief historical review might help. In «Biblical Archaeology», or the archaeology of Israel/Palestine, I suggest to distinguish three main phases: (a) the «Prove-the-Bible-archaeology»; (b) «National archaeology»; and (c), processual (or scientific) archaeology. Although these three «archaeologies» emerged subsequently during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, adherents of all three «archaeologies» coexist at present<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. History as a text

The main motive behind the foundation of societies for «Biblical Archaeology» in Britain and the United States (less so in Germany) was the wish to defend the historical reliability of the Bible against the onslaught of biblical criticism, and to defend it on the basis of facts on the ground. The factuality of the text and its contradictions, which were exposed, but not invented by the critics, was generously overlooked. The outcome of the endeavor is quite known: The search for the walls of Jericho, blown down by Joshua's trumpets,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for the possibility that especially in the Prophets the Septuagint preserves older versions, or parts of older versions of these books, E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: 1992, esp. ch. 3.

<sup>3</sup> With the statement «It (sc. Kings) is one of the *authorized* portraits of Israel's past (Chronicles is the other) so far as life and faith are concerned; and other portraits are simply of academic interest» (I.W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, Peabody 1995, 9), the author positions himself well beyond the limits of academic interest, or discourse.

<sup>4</sup> I do not discuss post-processual archaeology in this context, because, as far as I see, it does not have much impact, for the time being, on the archaeology of Israel/Palestine. This is less of a surprise vis-à-vis the sad fact that processual archaeology is still unknown to most biblical archaeologists in continental Europe.

resulted in the notion that Jericho had not had any walls at the time when Joshua is supposed to have passed by the place. While the most fervent critic will never be able to deny the possibility that God has the power to bring down walls by the sound of trumpets if She pleases so (but why should She?), the most faithful believer cannot credit God with miraculously destroying walls that never existed.

But it was not walls that «Early Biblical Archaeology» was looking for, but texts. It was the discovery of substantial texts from the Ancient Near East and their decipherment, in Mesopotamia as well as in Egypt, and to a lesser degree, the monuments, taken to represent reality iconographically in a one-to-one ratio as the texts were supposed to do in their turn, which directed the first archaeological expeditions to Palestine hoping to find similar items. Already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the then leading critical scholar, Michaelis at Göttingen, kindly requested from the Danish expedition to Arabia and adjacent countries to look for the stela with the law of Moses inscribed, erected by Joshua on Mount Gerizim (Dt 27.2-8). For «story» had not yet divorced itself from «history», and vice versa. History was in itself perceived as one-dimensional; it was textual in character. The basic text of history is constituted by the biblical tradition, which can be augmented and illustrated by archaeology, but never be altered or abandoned. This is the position of evangelical biblical scholarship to this very day<sup>5</sup>. Epistemologically, this position does not really distinguish between knowledge and belief: belief is knowledge, granted by the deity; and scientific theories contradicting a specific religious orientation are characterized as an aberrant, or just different, set of beliefs by the adherents of that orientation<sup>6</sup>.

«Biblical Archaeology», on this level of historical thought, comprises the study of every text and artefact from the ancient Near East capable of illustrating the Bible; i.e., mostly texts and artefacts from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

### 3. *History as text and context*

Critical scholarship, originating in its present form from the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, is frequently denounced – or rather praised, in the present writer's opinion – as «liberal». Critical biblical scholarship is indeed deeply rooted in, and contributed to the European citizens' emancipation from the traditional

<sup>5</sup> J.F. Drinkard, Review of A.R. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids 1998), *BASOR* 320 (2000) 98-100.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for an illustration of that attitude, I. Provan, *In the Stable with the Dwarves: Tradition, Interpretation, Faith and the History of Israel*, in: *Congress Volume Oslo 1998* (VTS 80), Leiden 2000, 281-319.

powers of crown and church<sup>7</sup>. The political liberalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century left the double legacy of constitutional democracy, of which the world can still be proud, and of nationalism, the «nation» as supreme power replacing God and the monarch. Scholarly liberalism left the dual legacy of rational, critical and self-critical thinking, achievements, which hopefully will never be abandoned again; and a set of political mythic constructs, replacing the traditional myths, foremost among them the myth of the «nation»<sup>8</sup>. Under the impact of quite different national myths – the Pilgrim Fathers guided by God to the Promised Land on the one hand, Germanic tribes transforming the Roman empire by re-settling it – the two intellectual giants of that period of research, W.F. Albright and A. Alt, seem to have had much more in common than they, and their immediate pupils, would have anticipated<sup>9</sup>. Still looking for something that did not exist<sup>10</sup> – the «Israelite nation»<sup>11</sup> – the pupils of these two giants, canonizing their teachers' aberrant results instead of their exemplaric attitudes and methods – burdened their pupils, i.e. the intellectual grandchildren of Albright and Alt, with the unpleasant task of partial scholarly parricide.

Within the framework of «national archaeology», and under the impact of critical biblical scholarship, archaeology had the chance to prove the text wrong and to alter the historical narrative in the retelling. If Ai did not exist at the time when Joshua was supposed to have passed by, «Ai» must have been transmitted by error instead of «Bethel» (Albright). If archaeology proves that there was no war of conquest by an invading Israelite host, the Israelites<sup>12</sup> must have come from the desert as land-hungry nomads – but from the

<sup>7</sup> The personalities and biographies of two of its leading protagonists might illustrate this statement: Ernest Renan and Julius Wellhausen.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for a detailed analysis, E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge 1997. In the case of A. Alt, the term «Geschichte» was used by him as if it were a supernatural entity, in brief: a deity; cf. R. Smend, *Albrecht Alt, in: Deutsche Alttestamentler in drei Jahrhunderten*, Göttingen 1989, 182-207 (196).

<sup>9</sup> Israeli archaeology under Y. Yadin – a researcher who might have come to every reader's mind who encountered the term «national archaeology» appears, from this perspective, rather as a late-comer.

<sup>10</sup> Ancient Israel was a number of different things at different times: a tribe, a kingdom, a state, a religious community, but never a «nation» as to be defined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE; cf. E.A. Knauf, *Die Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, Stuttgart 1994, 184-189.

<sup>11</sup> The titles of justly famous books are indicative: «Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel» in the case of A. Alt, «Geschichte des Volkes Israel und seiner Nachbarn» in the case of his last, and most brilliant, pupil H. Donner.

<sup>12</sup> Alt would have used the term «Proto-Israelites» if this expression had been available, but he would have applied it to the settlers of the Iron I period from Dan to Beer-sheba. The term «Proto-Israelites» has recently been attacked in some quarters without sufficient reason; it is perfectly applicable to the population of Iron I settlements extending in unbroken cultural continuity into the period of Israelite statehood. It is, however, only in the mountains of Samaria where the term «Proto-Israelites» is thus justified – not in Galilee, Judah, or the Negev.

desert they must have come (Alt). Archaeology was even allowed to become the basic source for the (re)construction of history wherever the biblical narrative became regarded as deficient on the level of factuality, i.e. for the time prior to 1000 BCE<sup>13</sup>. But the Bible remained the basic text, the theme for the scholar's brilliant variations. History had become two-dimensional: now it was a text, its contexts, its probable sub-texts, and the result: the text retold. That the biblical historical construct was just that: an intellectual, ideological construct<sup>14</sup>, was as inconceivable for the researchers as the notion that their own concepts of «nation» or «history» were nothing else. Because the Bible still constituted the basic text, conflicts between knowledge and belief, though occurring and admitted, could be marginalized and minimalized. Where the historian had the choice between equally feasible theories, the biblical historian tended to opt for the one closest to the biblical narrative (the present author protests the irrational character of establishing a preference as an historian, and the privileging of the Bible for reasons other than spiritual as a theologian). Hermeneutics took care of any problems that remained<sup>15</sup>.

Archaeology within the intellectual framework of «text and context» or «national archaeology» comprised in addition to settlement archaeology still art history, iconography, and numismatics<sup>16</sup>. Archaeology took an exaggerated interest in the artefact, which was frequently attributed with «meanings» it did not, and could not have<sup>17</sup>; field-work became some sort of gambling: would one find something «significant» or not – because archaeology systematically disregarded what would be found in any case: lots of dirt.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. E.A. Knauf, *From History to Interpretation*, in: D. Edelman ed., *The Fabric of History. Text, Artefact and Israel's Past*, Sheffield 1991, 26-64 (40 n. 2). Until the present, «Archaeologies of Israel/Palestine» tend to follow in their chronologies the approximative cultural periods before 1000 BCE, and the (pseudo-)precise regnal years of the kings of Israel and Judah thereafter, the latter being rather useless for archaeological dating once one has grasped its nature.

<sup>14</sup> The term «ideology» is used here without any pejorative connotations; cf. J. Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament*, Oxford 2000, 102-140.

<sup>15</sup> Being an incomplete and imprecise theory of self-regulating systems at their best, and a justification of circular reasoning at their worst.

<sup>16</sup> *Archäologie II. Biblische Archäologie* (U. Hübner), <sup>4</sup>RGG I, Tübingen 1998, 709-711.

<sup>17</sup> Suffice it to recall the «Israelite» collared-rim jar and the «Israelite» four-room-house (regarded as «Israelite» until discovered in Ammonite, Moabite and Edomite contexts). This is not to say that archaeology cannot establish ethnic boundaries, but this task demands much more than the study of a single artefact; cf. R. Kletter, *Pots and Politics: Material Remakings of Late Iron Age Judah in Relation to its Political Borders*, *BASOR* 314 (1999) 19-54.

#### 4. History as a four-dimensional construct

History, in the opinion of the present writer and his colleagues, is the study of past human societies and their changes in time and space<sup>18</sup>. History is no longer a specific technique to interpret and to renarrate ancient historiography, it is a social science based on primary evidence (like tax receipts, private and official letters, price lists and statements of accounts). Archaeology – now reduced to settlement archaeology – is the study of history based on the material remains of ancient societies. Archaeology is not only dependent on the active participation of scientists (archaeozoologists, archaeobotanists, archaeopathologists, nuclear physicists, geomorphologists, DNA-analysts, among others), it has become, in itself, as scientific as, e.g., astrophysics. Its basic methods are measuring, counting and statistical extrapolation. C-14-dates, if one has enough of them, are more precise than pottery typology ever can be<sup>19</sup> (archaeology never was cheap). The deficiencies of traditional archaeology (with no regard of statistics) will be overcome in time. J. Kamlah is right, when he states that the cooking pot traditionally attributed to the Iron IIA/B period (9<sup>th</sup> [traditionally 10<sup>th</sup>] through 8<sup>th</sup> centuries) was in use from the 12<sup>th</sup> [low chronology: 11<sup>th</sup>] through the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>20</sup>. But he is wrong in using the form indiscriminately as an indicator of occupation during the whole period. Once pottery typology will have come of age in Israel/Palestine, it will be possible to date the type by means of another standard distribution like (the present writer's guess) N(-875; 50), which would imply that 68% of the pots in question were produced between 925 and 825, 14% between 975 and 925 on the one hand and between 825 and 775 on the other, and 2 % in 1025/975 and 775/725.

<sup>18</sup> G. Lehmann, *Biblische Landeskunde oder kultur- und sozialgeographische Raum-analyse? Ein Forschungsbericht über aktuelle Entwicklungstendenzen in der historischen Geographie von Palästina*, in: *Fluchtpunkt Uruk*, FS für Hans Jörg Nissen, Rahden 1999, 95-124.

<sup>19</sup> The use of which, however, presupposes more of a scientific education than traditional archaeologists might have received. V. Fritz, *Kineret Excavations at Tell el-Oreimeh (Tel Kinrot). Preliminary Report on the 1994-1997 Seasons*, TA 26 (1999) 92-115 (112) gives for an olive seed the C-14-date «year 1030 B.C.E.». Without the standard deviation (probably in the range of  $\pm 50$ , this date is nonsensical; with this standard deviation, the date indicates that an olive was harvested between 1080 and 980 BCE with 68% probability (with 95% probability, the olive was eaten between 1130 and 930). In addition, Fritz is kind enough to quote the number of the locus from which the olive pit derives, but does not indicate its nature: does the olive pit derive from a floor (in this case, it was eaten while the house was in use), from fill under a floor (in this case, the olive was eaten during the construction of the house or even at an indeterminable period before), or does it derive from collapse (in this case, it was part of a mudbrick, with the same chronological consequences as in the second case).

<sup>20</sup> J. Kamlah, *Der Zeraqon-Survey 1989-1994*, Wiesbaden 2000, 120f.

Present archaeology does not presuppose any beliefs (except, perhaps, the assumption that a knowledge of the past based on empirical data and critical, rational reasoning is possible and desirable) and invites critical scrutiny of all its constructs<sup>21</sup> (those which survive this scrutiny at present form what historical knowledge is available for the time being).

Present archaeology respects all beliefs, ethnic origins, expressions of gender or sexual orientation equally, but does not attribute any argumentative privileges to these personal appurtenances (by nature or by choice). Present archaeology tells a story never told before (because the stories of the past were usually not interested to document what «went without saying» in their days): of everyday life, social stratification (how rich were the «rich» in the 10<sup>th</sup> century? Not very, compared to the «poor» of the 7<sup>th</sup> century), and the division of labour (and wealth) by gender. That means, present archaeology might still choose the medium of the narrative for the sake of the general public, or the undergraduate student. The basic information is contained, not as well but much better, in spreadsheets, graphs, figures and plans.

Communication between present archaeology and traditional archaeology might be difficult, as most adherents of the former possibly regard the last performers of the latter as treasure-hunters out of period.

##### *5. Conclusion: an archaeological look at the Bible.*

Present archaeology has turned the table: Instead of the biblical scholar telling the archaeologist what she or he has, or has been supposed to have, found, it is now the archaeologist telling the biblical scholar from which period and region the vast majority of the biblical traditions originated, in all probability<sup>22</sup>. As Albright insisted quite correctly: «There must always be external evidence». Present archaeology has started to provide this evidence.

*Ernst Axel Knauf, Bern*

<sup>21</sup> J. Wellhausen was already aware that history is not found (neither in the literary sources nor in the archaeological evidence), but always construed by the researcher: «Konstruieren muss man die Geschichte immer, es ist nur die Frage, ob man gut oder schlecht konstruiert».

<sup>22</sup> Mostly from Judah in the 7<sup>th</sup> century: I. Finkelstein – N.A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed. Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*, New York 2001.