

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
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Shiur #6c: *Tanakh* and Archaeology

C. The Era of the Forefathers

Let us start with the first period that arouses controversy – the era of our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.^[1] We might start out by noting that the very concept of the "era of the forefathers" is contested in itself. The concept was accepted by the early archaeologists studying the Land of Israel, led by William Albright,^[2] as essentially equivalent to the Middle Bronze Age.^[3] However, the minimalist school of Biblical archaeology maintains that the historical and geographical depictions in *Sefer Bereishit* do not conform to the periods of ancient history they claim to represent, but rather reflect a far later reality. Thus, for example, Nadav Na'aman writes:

"With regard to the era of the forefathers, which introduces the description of the period of the people of Israel in the Bible, there is widespread agreement among scholars. It is generally accepted that this is not a historical period, and that the vast majority, if not all, of the traditions included in the series of narratives about the forefathers, reflect a reality that is later, to a greater or lesser degree, than the beginning of the period of settlement... The narratives include many elements which in no way conform to the ancient dating [attributed to them]."^[4]

Obviously, the stories of the forefathers in and of themselves cannot be proved or disproved from an archaeological point of view. The main discussion in this regard therefore centers on the surrounding reality depicted in these narratives. We shall first examine some of the arguments of those who deny the reliability of the Torah's account of the era of the forefathers.^[5] The theme common to these arguments is that the Torah's description displays elements of anachronism – i.e., the projection of various phenomena dating from a later period to the period of the forefathers. Their claim is that the author of the accounts in the Torah uses some facts and information that he possessed from his own era, which did not belong to the era that he describes.

1. One of the best-known claims in this regard – also serving as an interesting example of the scholarly attitude in general – is the question of the domestication of camels. This issue was first raised at the end of the 19th century, but it received a renewed boost from none other than William Albright, who, as we have mentioned in the past, was generally motivated by a desire to use archaeology to corroborate the biblical account. In this particular matter, however, Albright noted that the domestication of camels took place only in the 12th century B.C.E., with the stirrings of a fundamental change in the nature of nomadism. Up until that time, he argued, nomads had depended on donkeys for transport, since they lived in peripheral areas of civilization, and for this reason "Our oldest certain evidence for the domestication of the camel cannot antedate the end of the twelfth century B.C."^[6] Only at a later stage did

nomadism evolve into the form of wandering tribes deep in the wilderness, with occasional raids on camel-back on settled agricultural territory, as described, for example, in the introduction to the story of Gid'on:

"And it was, when Israel had sown, that Midian and Amalek and the children of the east came up against them. And they encamped against them, and destroyed the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel – neither sheep, nor oxen, nor donkeys. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came like locusts for multitude, for both they and their camels were without number – and they entered the land to destroy it."
([Shoftim 6:3-5](#))

Albright, admittedly, was cautious in suggesting that

"These facts do not necessarily prove that earlier references to the camel in Genesis and Exodus are anachronistic, but they certainly suggest such an explanation."^[7]

However, many other archaeologists viewed this as absolute proof of anachronism in the descriptions found in *Sefer Bereishit*.

Since Albright's time, we have come to know much more about camels. For example, in a document discovered in Alalakh, in northern Syria, dated to the 17th century B.C.E., mentions "one portion of food for [each] camel."^[8] In excavations carried out in Har ha-Negev (Be'er Resisim), dating to the end of the third millennium B.C.E., camel bones were found along with bones of goats.^[9] There is also evidence of the early domestication of camels – from the 4th millennium B.C.E. – from the deserts of Iran,^[10] and elsewhere.^[11]

The accumulation of this archaeological evidence demonstrates that the domestication of camels had, indeed, already commenced in these ancient times, but in a limited way; only later did the phenomena expand to include large numbers of camels. This finding sits well with the biblical account, in which camels did not play a central role, and their numbers were relatively small, until the time of the Judges. In the story of Avraham's servant and Rivka, the Torah mentions "ten of his master's camels" ([Bereishit 24:10](#)); in the gifts that Yaakov offers Esav, we find "thirty milk camels with their young" (ibid. 32:16); and in the account of the sale of Yosef we find a "caravan of Yishme'elim came from the Gil'ad, with their camels carrying gum balm and ladanum" (ibid. 37:25). We may therefore conclude that camels were not common, and were used mainly to carry expensive merchandise. The camels that Avraham's servant brought with him apparently represented a factor in the estimation of the avaricious Lavan (ibid., 30-31). In other narratives in the Torah, camels are absent: in the descent of Yosef's brothers to Egypt we find only donkeys (ibid. 42:26-27, and elsewhere); in the spoils seized from Midian we find "sixty-one thousand asses" ([Bamidbar 31:34](#)), but no mention of any camels. In contrast, from the period of the Judges onwards we find a great many camels. In the war of the children of Gad and the children of Reuven against the Hagri'im, we find: "And they captured their cattle, [and] of their camels fifty

thousand" (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I, 21). Iyov, at the end of his life, had six thousand camels ([Iyov 42:12](#)).

This phenomenon shows the extent to which our knowledge in the realm of biblical archaeology is fragile, and changes in accordance with circumstances. Albright himself indeed changed his opinion later on, and wrote, *inter alia*:

"In summary, the real domestication of the camel was no earlier than the end of the Bronze Age, although partial and sporadic domestication may already have existed a few hundred years earlier."^[12]

However, these later findings did not deter the minimalists^[13] from propagating Albright's outdated theory – which he himself had retracted – that the mention of camels in the Torah represents an anachronism.^[14]

2. Various scholars have argued that anachronism is also present in the names of different places that appear in the narratives of the forefathers, but which did not exist at that time. For example, this argument is raised especially in relation to the city of Beer Sheva – which, according to archaeological evidence, was not inhabited during the era of the forefathers, nor even during the period that followed.^[15]

This argument, which sounds quite convincing at first, is based on two assumptions:

- a. that Beer Sheva is mentioned in the stories of the forefathers as an ancient city;
- b. that this ancient city is the place identified as such today, at Tel Sheva.

The first assumption does not conform with the biblical narrative. The Torah refers to Beer Sheva in two places, and in both cases it is clear that the reference is not to a city, but rather to an encounter at wells. Following the covenant and the oath between Avraham and Avimelekh, we are told, "Therefore he called that **place** Be'er Shava, for there they both swore (*nishbe'u*)" ([Bereishit 21:31](#)). Thereafter, in the encounter between Yitzchak and Avimelekh, we find:

"And they rose up early in the morning and they **swore** (*va-yishav'u*) to each other, and Yitzchak sent them, and they parted from him in peace. And it was on that day that the servants of Yitzchak came and told him about the well which they had dug, and they said to him, We have found water. And he called it **Shiv'a; therefore the name of the city is Beer Sheva**, until this day." (ibid. 26:31-33)

Here the Torah notes that the name given to the place was actually the name of the well – like the names that he gave to the other wells mentioned in the same chapter (Esek, Sitna, and Rehovot – ibid. 20-22). Only later on was the city called "Beer Sheva" – owing to its proximity to the well (*be'er*) which was called Shiv'a). There is therefore no basis to the argument that the Torah is talking about a fortified city from the time of the forefathers, of which some sort of evidence should logically remain,^[16] rather, it refers to the site of the city at a later period.^[17]

As to the identification of the ancient city of Beer Sheva with Tel Sheva, here too there is room for doubt. Ironically, it was Na'aman himself who proposed identifying the biblical city with Bir al-Saba, within the boundaries of the Turkish/Ottoman section of the modern day city of Beer Sheva, some 5km west of Tel Beer Sheva.^[18] This argument was supported by the fact that this location

"was suited to large-scale civilian settlement that was constantly growing, in terms of proximity to far more accessible sources of water than Tel Sheva, whose water sources are poorer."^[19]

Artifacts have been discovered at this site dating back to the Early Chalcolithic period, and to the Early Iron Age,^[20] but the site has not been fully excavated: there are walls whose top level has revealed remains from the Later Iron Age, but their foundations extend at least two meters further down, and these have not yet been exposed.^[21] Thus, it may be that artifacts from the Middle Bronze Period will yet be found at Bir al-Saba; or, alternatively, the biblical Beer Sheva may actually lie elsewhere.^[22]

3. Another argument concerns the appearance of ethnic groups in *Sefer Bereishit* – including the Philistines (Pelishtim), Hivvites (Chivvim), and Hittites (Chittim). According to Egyptian and other sources, the Pelishtim appeared in Eretz Yisrael only at the beginning of the Iron Age – i.e., during the period of the Judges. How is it, then, that they are mentioned several times in *Sefer Bereishit*?^[23] Here, again, the claim is that such accounts are anachronistic, and that the author made a mistake in referring to the Pelishtim who did not exist at that time at all.^[24]

However, closer examination of the biblical text shows clearly that there are significant differences between the Pelishtim of the period of the Judges, and the Pelishtim referred to during the period of the forefathers.^[25] For example, during the earlier period the Pelishtim are located in Gerar, in the Negev:

"And Avraham journeyed from there to the land of the Negev, and he dwelled between Kadesh and Shur and he sojourned in Gerar" ([Bereishit 20:1](#)),

while the Torah notes that during this period the coastal areas were under the control of the Canaanite nations (ibid. 10:19; [Bamidbar 13:29](#)). Furthermore, the Pelishtim of the earlier period were ruled by a king with a Semitic name (Avimelekh).^[26] In contrast, the Pelishtim who appear during the period of the Judges lived in cities along the sea shore – Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ashdod, and not in the Negev region. These Pelishtim were led by "*seranim*" (local lords). Had mention of the Pelishtim indeed been anachronistic, we would have expected to find some overlap between the list of cities of the Pelishtim as we know them from the Books of the Prophets, and their cities in the narratives of the forefathers; likewise, we would expect to find some consistency in their form of rule.

In addition, the Pelishtim during the period of the Judges are described as a bitter enemy who wages war against Israel over parts of the promised land, whereas the Pelishtim during the earlier period forged covenants and swore oaths with Avraham and Yitzchak (and it is for this reason, apparently, that the land of these ancient Pelishtim is not included within the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael). This represents clear proof that when the Torah was written, the later Pelishtim who would compete with the Israelites over the inheritance of the land were unknown.

"The difference between the Pelishtim in Gerar and the Pelishtim of the coastal cities is... absolute and pertains to the very essence (of our understanding of who the Pelishtim are): they are different in terms of their country of origin; in terms of their area of habitation; in terms of their period in history; in terms of their form of government; and in terms of the historical relations between them and Israel. The only thing that they share is the name."^[27]

This phenomenon of the common name may be explained as an ancient name that first belonged to the ancient Pelishtim, and which was later adopted by the Pelishtim who lived on the coast.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] There are some biblical scholars who declare this ancient period to lie "outside of the discussion," since there is "zero chance of discovering artifacts that would testify to the forefathers' wanderings in the land and in neighboring regions, and about the journey of the tribes of Israel through the wilderness; or of finding pharaonic monuments mentioning the mass enslavement of the men, and the Exodus. This, then, is a manifestly 'prehistoric' period, which lies beyond the reach of archaeological research... Concerning this period there is no real possibility of bringing external proofs either in support or as refutation" (U. Simon, "*Archeologia Post-Mikrait u-Post Tzionit*," in *Ha-Pulmus al ha-Emet ha-Historit ba-Mikra*, p. 138). Nevertheless, there has been extensive discussion surrounding the period of the forefathers, and our enquiry is whether the findings that exist support or contradict what we know from the Torah.

^[2] See, for example, his book, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (London, 1949).

^[3] The names of the different periods of ancient history are determined by the principal raw material used by man during that period: the Stone Age, the Chalcolithic Age (named for the word "bronze" in Greek), the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. Since each of these periods lasted many hundreds of years, they are divided by convention into sub-periods (early, middle and late), and even these are further sub-divided. Obviously, the boundaries of these periods are not absolute, since the transition from the use of one type of utensils to another was gradual. In general, the Middle Bronze Age refers to the years 2000-1550 B.C.E.

[4] N. Na'aman, "Parashat 'Kibbush ha-Harets' be-Sefer Yehoshua u-va-Metziut ha-Historit," in: N. Na'aman and Y. Finkelstein (eds.), *Mi-Navadut li-Melukha*, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 286-287.

[5] A summary of most of these arguments is to be found in Na'aman, p. 287, and in the notes ad loc.

[6] W.F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 207.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See W.Y. Wiseman, 'Ration Lists from Alalakh VII,' *JCS* 8, 1959, p. 29, line 59; R.W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*, London 1975, p. 64.

[9] R. Cohen, *Ha-Yishuvim be-Har ha-Negev*, doctoral dissertation submitted to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986, p. 303.

[10] Y. Bar-Yosef, "Reshitan shel Chevrot Pastoraliot ba-Levant," in: S. Achituv (ed.), *Mechkarim be-Arkheologia shel Navvadim ba-Negev u-ve-Sinai*, Beer Sheva 5758, pp. 7-25.

[11] Other sources are cited by Y.M. Grintz, *Yichudo ve-Kadmuto shel Sefer Bereishit*, Jerusalem 5743, p. 17, n. 32. L. Resnick, *Ha-Tanakh Min ha-Shetach* 1, Jerusalem 5771, pp. 116-123 notes seventeen archaeological proofs for the domestication of camels in the ancient period.

[12] Cited by Grintz.

[13] Such as Na'aman, who, in 1990, could still write (ibid., p. 287), "The narratives contain many elements which are absolutely inconsistent with the ancient date. For example... the presentation of the camel as the forefathers' beast of wandering, although the domestication of the camel for labor and for wandering took place only in the last third of the second millennium B.C.E." Finkelstein and Silverman, p. 54, similarly write, "We know that camels were not domesticated for carrying burdens until the end of the second millennium"; Y. Knohl, *Me-Ayin Banu*, Or Yehuda 2008, p. 52.

[14] Here is it worth citing Kenneth Kitchen, a well-respected scholar of biblical archaeology and Professor Emeritus at Liverpool University, referred to by *The Times* newspaper (Oct. 13, 2002) as "the very architect of Egyptian chronology." In commenting on the approach of Finkelstein and Silverman, whom he mentions *inter alia* in note 30 and in various contexts throughout the chapter, Kitchen writes: "On the patriarchal and exodus periods our two friends are utterly out of their depth, hopelessly misinformed, and totally misleading... Camels are *not* anachronistic in the early second millennium (Middle Bronze Age)" (K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids and Cambridge 2003, p. 465).

[15] Na'aman, ibid., p. 287.

[16] See Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, "Historia u-Mikra – ha-Yelchu Shenayim Yachdav? – Sefer Bereishit," *Al Atar* 7, p. 56; Y. Rosenson, "Sippur Avar – Sifrut ve-Historia be-Tanakh – Stira o hashlama?", *Al Atar* 7, p. 132.

[17] There is still room to question the Torah's mention of the city at this site, even if the reference is not to a city from the time of the forefathers, since according to archaeological evidence, Beer Sheva was settled only at the beginning of the period of the Judges, not at the time of Moshe. This question relates to our discussion in chapter 2 of later verses in the Torah. All of this, however, assumes that the biblical Beer Sheva is in fact Tel Sheva, for which see below.

[18] See N. Na'aman, 'The Inheritance of the Sons of Simeon', *ZDPV* 96, 1980, pp. 132-152; Y. Meitlis, *Lachpor et ha-Tanakh*, Jerusalem 5766, p. 116.

[19] Y. Gilad and P. Fabian, "7,000 Shenot Hityashvut: Ha-Seridim ha-Arkheologiim bi-Beer Sheva min ha-Elef ha-Shishi Lifnei ha-Sefira ad Shalhei ha-Elef ha-Rishon la-Sefira," in: Y. Gardos and A. Meir-Glitzenstein (eds.), *Beer Sheva: Metropolin be-Hithavut*, Jerusalem 5768, p. 314.

[20] The Iron Age followed the Bronze Age (see above); it refers generally to the period from 1200 to 586 B.C.E. It is conventionally divided into the Early and Late Iron Age, with the division between them paralleling the transition between the period of the Judges and the period of the Monarchy – i.e., around the year 1000 B.C.E. In a later shiur we will address the conflict over this transition and when it took place, which pertains to the scope of David's kingdom.

[21] Meitlis, p. 116, n. 5, argues that perhaps the biblical Beer Sheva should be identified with Tel Mashosh (Tel Masos), which lies about 12 km east of Beer Sheva; remains of habitation from the Middle Bronze Period have been found there.

[22] Gilad and Fabian, pp. 312-313; see *ibid.* 311-314 for a summary of the findings from Bir al-Saba.

[23] For instances, in the encounters between Avimelekh, king of the Pelishtim, with Avraham ([Bereishit 21:32](#)) and with Yitzchak (*ibid.* 26).

[24] This well-known claim has been raised by many scholars. See, for example, T. Dotan, *Ha-Pelishtim ve-Tarbutam ha-Chomrit*, Jerusalem 5727, p. 15; B. Mazar, *Kena'an ve-Yisrael – Mechkarim Historiim*, Jerusalem 1974, p. 136; Na'aman, *ibid.*, p. 287; Finkelstein and Silverman, *ibid.*, n. 18, p. 54.

[25] My explanation here is based on Y.M. Grintz, *Motzaei Dorot*, Jerusalem 5729, pp. 99-129.

[26] The name of the commander of Avimelekh's army, Fikhol ([Bereishit 21:22](#)), also appears to be western-Semite (see Tzadok, *Olam ha-Tanakh: Bereishit*, Tel Aviv 2000, p. 139). Some scholars have argued that the name is Egyptian, although their arguments have been rejected (see Y. Yellin-Kalai, "Fikhol", *Encyclopedia Mikrait* VI, Jerusalem 5732, column 456).

[27] Grintz, p. 114.