

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*  
By Rav Amnon Bazak

**Shiur #6g: *Tanakh* and Archaeology (continued) – The Era of Settlement**

**F. Settlement of the land**

All scholars working in the field of biblical archaeology recognize the existence of a significant process of settlement in the central mountainous region of Eretz Yisrael, starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., as manifest in the establishment of hundreds of small points of settlement bearing a unique character. These villages stand out in their modesty and simplicity, with no decorations on the clay vessels and almost no jewelry; they possess a special form of construction of houses, and a number of other characteristics.<sup>[1]</sup>

The main controversy among archaeologists concerns the question of the identity of these new settlers. The minimalist school maintains<sup>[2]</sup> that what became known as Am Yisrael was actually formed out of a collection of local nomadic groups who abandoned their villages on the coastal plain or in the Negev, and settled in these new areas. Not only was there no sojourn in, and no exodus from, Egypt, but there is no evidence as to the invasion of the land of Israel by an external population. Rather, the process of settlement described above is a phenomenon that began from within the country, by the ancient inhabitants of the land. These settlers slowly invented for themselves an Israelite identity and stories about the origins of their existence, such as the stories about the forefathers and the Exodus. Hundreds of years later, these stories were committed to writing, and thus the majority of the *Tanakh* came into being.

Scholars who disagree with the minimalist school raise several arguments against their approach. We shall examine some of their main points.

1. One of the main questions is whether the characteristics of these settlements are unique, indicating a specific national identity, or whether they are part of a more general phenomenon, with similar examples in other places. One of the phenomena which, to all opinions, is unique to the communities formed in this region, is the absence of pig bones – in clear contrast to the other inhabited areas in the land during the same period. How is this phenomenon to be explained? The simple answer would seem to be that the inhabitants, *Bnei Yisrael*, observed the biblical prohibition against pork ([Vayikra 11:7](#)). The minimalists, who maintain that the Torah would be written only hundreds of years later, are forced to propose their own explanations, and ultimately they conclude that the phenomenon arises "from causes that have yet to be properly clarified."<sup>[3]</sup>

Moreover, the question of whether the form of settlement is unique likewise depends to some extent on the basic assumptions of the researcher, rather than

on the findings themselves. In contrast to the conclusions drawn by Finkelstein and Silverman, Amichai Mazar writes:

"The settlement phenomenon, whereby hundreds of points of settlement were established in the mountain region during the Iron Age I, reflects a socio-economic structure which, to my mind, accords with the nature of Israelite society during the period of the Judges, as described in Scripture... It appears to me that the material culture that reveals itself at the settlement locations in the mountain region indicates a population with its own unique characteristics, whose way of life cannot be equated with any other Canaanite population group known to us from the Late Bronze Period. The term "proto-Israelite," which is employed by a number of scholars to define this population, seems to me a way of evading their obvious identification with the Israelites of the period of the Judges."<sup>[4]</sup>

As we have seen many times before, the interpretation given to identical material varies dramatically from one researcher to the next.

2. One of the most important findings pertaining to this period is the Merneptah Stele (Israel Stele), discovered in 1896 during excavations in the ancient Egyptian capital of Thebes (the biblical No-Amon).<sup>[5]</sup> This large stone stele celebrates the victories of King Merneptah, son of Ramesses II, and it includes a list of conquests during the campaign undertaken by the king in the year 1208 B.C.E., including the following:

"Ashkelon has been overcome;  
Gezer has been captured;  
Yano'am is made non-existent."

The inscription then goes on to state,

"Israel is laid waste and his seed is not."

Clearly, this claim represents a wild exaggeration – not only concerning Israel, but also in other aspects (a common feature of victory inscriptions in the Ancient East), but the important point is the mention of an entity named "Israel", living in the country already by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and the (exaggerated) pride of Merneptah upon annihilating it.<sup>[6]</sup> This indicates that "Israel" was an independent body of some importance, on the northern border of Egypt, and this testimony is well suited to the period of settlement, before Israel became a real kingdom. The inscription represents a substantial challenge to the minimalist approach, which is forced into various different attempts at explaining or evading it.<sup>[7]</sup>

3. The claim that there are no traces of invasion by an external population and a specific process of expansion is likewise highly contentious. An extensive archaeological survey,<sup>[8]</sup> known as the "Menashe Hills Survey,"<sup>[9]</sup> discovered thousands of previously unknown sites, including some 450 that were dated to the period of the settlement of the tribes of Israel. According to the survey, the direction of expansion of the Israelite villages was from the east westward, and

from the center both southward and northward. These findings accord with the biblical account, as well as with the shifting of the spiritual center of Am Yisrael from Mount Eval to Shilo, and from Shilo to Jerusalem.

The survey area included, *inter alia*, the strip stretching from Beit Shean to Wadi Petzael, the region through which Bnei Yisrael entered the land, according to *Sefer Yehoshua*. More than 100 sites have been discovered in this region with artifacts dating to the period of settlement (13<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.), most of them belonging to just a single period.

Another important finding concerns the vessels discovered at these sites. The pottery vessels are rather primitive in the eastern sites, and show increasing sophistication as one with the development of settlement westwards.

All of the above suggests "gradual settlement from east to west, or an entry from the eastern side of the Jordan to the western side, towards the mountain range."<sup>[10]</sup> Indeed, some signs of settlement have also been discovered on the eastern side of the Jordan, to the north of the Dead Sea, that are very similar to the discoveries on the western side.<sup>[11]</sup>

4. In the 1980s, archaeologist Adam Zertal discovered a large rectangular structure (7x9 m) at the Mount Eval site.<sup>[12]</sup> The only access to the top of the structure is via a ramp that ascends to the center of it. To the left of the ramp there is another ramp, leading to the 'sovev' – a foundation wall surrounding the central structure on three sides. Within this area approximately 1,000 burned bones of young male animals were found, all belonging to species defined as "pure" in the Torah. No figurines, bones of pigs, or any other familiar indications of Canaanite worship sites were discovered.<sup>[13]</sup> The findings at the site match the period of the beginnings of the settlement period – i.e., the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>[14]</sup> The altar belongs to just one period, and it was left in an orderly state, not destroyed. These data and others correspond almost perfectly<sup>[15]</sup> with the description in the Torah and the Books of the Prophets regarding the structure of the altar in general,<sup>[16]</sup> and may even allow an identification of this structure with the altar which Bnei Yisrael are commanded in [Devarim 27:4-5](#) to build, the enactment of which is described in [Yehoshua 8:30-35](#).<sup>[17]</sup>

These points and others show that there is a wide gap between the claim that there is no evidence of the entry of any external population into the land – itself a weak argument – and the evidence. We once again come back to the issue of whether this is a genuine archaeological dispute, or a dispute over fundamental world-views, whose roots have nothing to do with archaeology.

In concluding our discussion of the conquest and settlement of the land we note a further difficulty presented by the assumptions of the scholarly view that *Sefer Yehoshua*, along with other Books, was written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, at the earliest, and that the reliability of its account is therefore in question. Had the Book indeed been written from within the perspective of the later Davidic monarchy, why would the author

not include some hint to the future establishment of the Israelite kingdom? The Book conveys an ideal view of reality already in the time of Yehoshua:

"Nothing failed of all the good things [of] which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel; it all came to pass." (21:43)

Could such a sentence have been written centuries after the events described, if the author knew all that was still to happen?<sup>[18]</sup>

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

---

<sup>[1]</sup> The building followed a "four spaces" or "house of pillars" plan, with three parallel oblong living areas and a fourth area stretching across the back of all three. These villages were also characterized by special pottery, including jugs and cooking pots with an outward-pointing folded rim; as well as various inscriptions, indicating that their inhabitants were literate; and more (see Meitlis's summary, pp. 147-150).

<sup>[2]</sup> For a summary of this approach, see Finkelstein and Silverman, pp. 107-128.

<sup>[3]</sup> Finkelstein and Silverman, p. 128.

<sup>[4]</sup> A. Mazar, p. 106

<sup>[5]</sup> For more on this stele, the inscription, and its translation, see Na'aman, p. 310.

<sup>[6]</sup> There is considerable historical irony in the fact that the two most ancient archaeological proofs concerning the existence of Am Yisrael – the Merneptah Stele and the Mesha Stele – both describe the annihilation of Israel: "Israel is laid waste and his seed is not", says the former, while the latter asserts, "Israel has perished; it has perished forever!"

<sup>[7]</sup> See, for example, Na'aman, pp. 311-312, who concludes his discussion of this important finding with the words, "Despite the great importance attached to the very appearance of the name 'Israel' on an external document at the beginning of the proto-historic era of the People of Israel, and despite the temptation to try to integrate this ancient finding into Israelite history, it would seem that at this stage of the research it is advisable to avoid attaching to it any sort of hypothesis as to the nature of the Israelite settlement at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E."

<sup>[8]</sup> An archaeological survey examines a broad area; the historical sites discovered within it are mapped, measured, and dated by means of a careful gathering of the pottery shards found on the ground.

<sup>[9]</sup> The survey, headed by Adam Zertal, was carried out over a period of thirty years, covering some 3,000 square kilometers. The findings of the survey have been published in four volumes to date: A. Zertal, *Sekker Har Menashe*, published in Hebrew, between the years 1992 and 2005 (Tel Aviv-Haifa).

<sup>[10]</sup> A. Zertal, "Tanakh, Archaologia ve-Reshit Yisrael," in: *Ha-Pulmus al ha-Emet ha-Historit ba-Mikra*, p. 79.

<sup>[11]</sup> See also Meitlis, p. 159.

<sup>[12]</sup> For an extensive discussion of the subject, see Zertal's *Sekker Har Menashe*.

<sup>[13]</sup> It should be noted that the architectural structure of the site is remarkably reminiscent of the description of the sacrificial altar described in the Mishna (*Middot* chapter 3).

<sup>[14]</sup> This conclusion is partly based on the discovery of Egyptian scarabs and pottery. The discovery of the Egyptian scarabs also indicates some sort of connection with Egypt.

<sup>[15]</sup> It should be noted that bones of deer were discovered at the site, and these are not mentioned in the Torah as animals suitable for sacrifice. Nevertheless it should be noted that the deer is in fact a "pure" animal ([Deut. 14:5](#)), and there is no explicit prohibition in the Torah against offering a pure animal (see Zertal, p. 100). Rabbi Yoel bin-Nun ("*Ha-Mivneh be-Har Eval ve-Zihuyo ke-Mizbeach*," *Lifnei Efraim u-Vinyamin u-Menashe*, Jerusalem 5745, pp. 137-162) argues that the source of these deer bones is "the meal offering of the remains of vessels and meals eaten in a state of purity or as sanctified meals, brought as a general mass free-will offering to fill the stone altar or the remains of the sanctified meal inaugurating the site."

<sup>[16]</sup> The discovery of the altar gave rise to a great debate, since it presents a problem both for Bible critics (as we have seen in previous chapters) and for the minimalists, who date the texts to the 7<sup>th</sup> century and deny their historical authenticity. The minimalists, in response to the discovery of the structure on Mount Eval, proposed that the site was a "watch tower" (Zertal, pp. 190-206). Zertal also discusses the political motivations behind the resistance to identifying the structure as an altar (ad loc., pp. 133, 296 and more).

<sup>[17]</sup> As Zertal notes. However, there are some scholars who oppose this identification because the altar at Mount Eval shows initial worship upon natural rock, upon which the altar was later built (in a similar manner to the development of Shaul's altar in [Shmuel I 14:33-35](#)) and used for decades. The text, in contrast, speaks of an altar made of "whole stones" that was built for temporary use in the ceremony of the blessings and curses between Gerizim and Eval. In any event, the assumption that this was an Israelite altar from the period of the settlement seems most probable.

<sup>[18]</sup> This point is noted by Y. Elitzur, pp. 29-30.