

# NGM.com

---

by Robert Draper • 19 min read • [original](#)

By Robert Draper

The woman sitting on a bench in the Old City of Jerusalem, round-faced and bundled up against the autumn chill, chews on an apple while studying the building that has brought her both fame and aggravation. It doesn't really look like a building—just some low stone walls abutting an ancient terraced retaining wall 60 feet high. But because the woman is an archaeologist, and because this is her discovery, her eyes see what others might not. She sees the building's position, on a northern escarpment of the ancient city overlooking Jerusalem's Kidron Valley, and she imagines an ideal perch from which to survey a kingdom. She imagines the Phoenician carpenters and stonemasons who erected it in the tenth century B.C. She imagines as well the Babylonians who destroyed it four centuries later. Most of all, she imagines the man she believes commissioned and occupied the building. His name was David. This, she has declared to the world, is most likely the building described in the Second Book of Samuel: "King Hiram of Tyre sent... carpenters and masons, and they built a house for David. And David realized that the Lord had established him as king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for the sake of His people Israel."

The woman's name is Eilat Mazar. Munching and gazing, she is the picture of equanimity—until a tour guide shows up. He's a young Israeli man accompanied by a half dozen tourists who assemble in front of the bench so they can view the building. The moment he opens his mouth, Mazar knows what's coming. The tour guide is a former archaeology student of hers. She's heard how he brings tourists to this spot and informs them that this is NOT the palace of David and that all the archaeological work at the City of David is a way for right-wing Israelis to expand the country's territorial claims and displace Palestinians.

Mazar jumps up from the bench and marches over to the tour guide. She chews him out in a staccato of Hebrew, while he stares passively at her. The gaping tourists watch her stalk off.

"You really need to be strong," she mutters as she walks. "It's like everyone wants to destroy what you do." And then, more plaintively: "Why? What did we do wrong?"

The archaeologist gets into her car. She looks stricken. "I feel like I'm really getting sick from stress," she says. "I've lost years from my life."

In no other part of the world does archaeology so closely resemble a contact sport. Eilat Mazar is one of the reasons why. Her announcement in 2005 that she believed she had unearthed the palace of King David amounted to a ringing defense of an old-school proposition under assault for more than a quarter century—namely, that the Bible's depiction of the empire established under David and continued by his son Solomon is historically accurate. Mazar's claim has emboldened those Christians and Jews throughout the world who maintain that the Old Testament can and should be taken literally. Her purported discovery carries particular resonance in Israel, where the story of David and Solomon is interwoven with the Jews' historical claims to biblical Zion.

That narrative is familiar to any student of the Bible. A young shepherd named David from the tribe of Judah slays the giant Goliath from the enemy tribe of the Philistines, is elevated to king of Judah following the death of Saul at the close of the 11th century B.C., conquers Jerusalem, unites the people of Judah with the disparate Israelite tribes to the north, and thereupon amasses a royal dynasty that continues with Solomon well into the tenth century B.C. But while the Bible says David and Solomon built the kingdom of Israel into a powerful and prestigious empire stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, from Damascus to the Negev, there's a slight problem—namely, that despite decades of searching, archaeologists had found no solid evidence that David or Solomon ever built anything.

Then Mazar sounded her trumpet. "She knew what she was doing," says fellow Israeli archaeologist David Ilan of Hebrew Union College. "She waded into the fray purposefully, wanting to make a statement."

Ilan himself doubts that Mazar has found King David's palace. "My gut tells me this is an eighth- or ninth-century building," he says, constructed a hundred years or more after Solomon died in 930 B.C. More broadly, critics question Mazar's motives. They note that her excavation work was underwritten by two organizations—the City of David Foundation and the Shalem Center—dedicated to the assertion of Israel's territorial rights. And they scoff at Mazar's allegiance to the antiquated methods of her archaeological forebears, such as her grandfather, who unapologetically worked with a trowel in one hand and the Bible in the other.

The once common practice of using the Bible as an archaeological guide has been widely contested as an unscientific case of circular reasoning—and with particular relish by Tel Aviv University's contrarian-in-residence Israel Finkelstein, who has made a career out of merrily demolishing such assumptions. He and other proponents of "low chronology" say that the weight of archaeological evidence in and around Israel suggests that the dates posited by biblical scholars are a century off. The

"Solomonic" buildings excavated by biblical archaeologists over the past several decades at Hazor, Gezer, and Megiddo were not constructed in David and Solomon's time, he says, and so must have been built by kings of the ninth-century B.C.'s Omride dynasty, well after David and Solomon's reign.

During David's time, as Finkelstein casts it, Jerusalem was little more than a "hill-country village," David himself a raggedy upstart akin to Pancho Villa, and his legion of followers more like "500 people with sticks in their hands shouting and cursing and spitting—not the stuff of great armies of chariots described in the text.

"Of *course* we're not looking at the palace of David!" Finkelstein roars at the very mention of Mazar's discovery. "I mean, come on. I respect her efforts. I like her—very nice lady. But this interpretation is—how to say it?—a bit naive."

Now it is Finkelstein's theory that is under siege. On the heels of Mazar's claim to have discovered King David's palace, two other archaeologists have unveiled remarkable finds. Twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem in the Elah Valley—the very spot where the Bible says the young shepherd David slew Goliath—Hebrew University professor Yosef Garfinkel claims to have unearthed the first corner of a Judaeon city dating to the exact time that David reigned. Meanwhile, 30 miles south of the Dead Sea in Jordan, a University of California, San Diego professor named Thomas Levy has spent the past eight years excavating a vast copper-smelting operation at Khirbat en Nahas. Levy dates one of the biggest periods of copper production at the site to the tenth century B.C.—which, according to the biblical narrative, is when David's antagonists the Edomites dwelled in this region. (However, scholars like Finkelstein maintain that Edom did not emerge until two centuries later.) The very existence of a large mining and smelting operation fully two centuries before Finkelstein's camp maintains the Edomites emerged would imply complex economic activity at the exact time that David and Solomon reigned. "It's *possible* that this belonged to David and Solomon," Levy says of his discovery. "I mean, the scale of metal production here is that of an ancient state or kingdom."

Levy and Garfinkel—both of whom have been awarded grants by the National Geographic Society—support their contentions with a host of scientific data, including pottery remnants and radiocarbon dating of olive and date pits found at the sites. If the evidence from their ongoing excavations holds up, yesteryear's scholars who touted the Bible as a factually accurate account of the David and Solomon story may be vindicated.

As Eilat Mazar says with palpable satisfaction, "This is the end of Finkelstein's school."

A busy highway, Route 38, crosses the ancient road that follows the Elah Valley en route to the Mediterranean Sea. Beneath the hills on either side of the road lie the ruins of Socoh and Azekah. According to the Bible, the Philistines encamped in this valley, between the two towns, just before their fateful encounter with David.

The battlefield of legend is now quiet and abounds with wheat, barley, almond trees, and grapevines, not to mention a few of the indigenous terebinth (*elah* in Hebrew) trees from which the valley derives its name. A small bridge extends from Route 38 over the Brook of Elah. During high season, tourist buses park here so that their passengers can climb down into the valley and retrieve a rock to take back home and impress friends with a stone from the same place as the one that killed Goliath.

"Maybe Goliath never existed," says Garfinkel as he drives across the bridge and up to his site, Khirbet Qeiyafa. "The story is that Goliath came from a giant city, and in the telling of it over the centuries, he became a giant himself. It's a metaphor. Modern scholars want the Bible to be like the *Oxford Encyclopedia*. People didn't write history 3,000 years ago like this. In the evening by the fire, this is where stories like David and Goliath started."

Beneath Garfinkel's bald, scholarly exterior and gentle sense of humor—which reveals a jagged edge when the subject is Israel Finkelstein—lurks a man of unmistakable ambition. He first learned from an Israeli Antiquities Authority ranger about a nine-foot-high megalithic wall looming over the Brook of Elah. He began digging in earnest in 2008.

The wall, Garfinkel discovered, was of the same variety seen in the northern cities of Hazor and Gezer—a casemate of two walls with a chamber in between—and it encircled a fortified city of about six acres. Private houses abutted the city wall, an arrangement not seen in Philistine society. After shoveling out the topsoil, Garfinkel uncovered coins and other artifacts from the time of Alexander the Great. Beneath that Hellenistic layer he found buildings scattered with four olive pits, which carbon-14 analysis dated to around 1000 B.C. He also found an ancient tray for baking pita bread, along with hundreds of bones from cattle, goats, sheep, and fish—but no pig bones. In other words, Judaeans, rather than Philistines, must have lived (or at least dined) here. Because Garfinkel's excavation team also uncovered a very rare find—a clay pottery sherd with writing that appears to be a proto-Canaanite script with verbs characteristic of Hebrew—the conclusion to him seemed obvious: Here was a tenth-century B.C. complex Judaeans society of the sort that low chronologists like Finkelstein claimed did not exist.

And what was its name? Garfinkel found his answer upon discovering that the fortified city had not one but two gates—the only such site found thus far in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. "Two gates" translates into Hebrew as *shaarayim*, a

city mentioned three times in the Bible. One of those references (I Samuel 17:52) describes the Philistines fleeing David back to Gath via the "road from Shaaraim."

"You have David and Goliath, and you have our site, and it fits," says Garfinkel simply. "It's typical Judaea, from the animal bones to the city wall. Give us two arguments why this is Philistine. One argument is because Finkelstein doesn't want us to destroy low chronology. OK, so give us a second reason."

Here would be a second reason to be skeptical of Yossi Garfinkel's conclusions: He announced them, swiftly and dramatically, despite the fact that he had only four olive pits on which to base his dating, a single inscription of a highly ambiguous nature, and a mere 5 percent of his site excavated. In other words, says archaeologist David Ilan, "Yossi has an agenda—partly ideological, but also personal. He's a very smart and ambitious guy. Finkelstein's the big gorilla, and the young bucks think he's got a monopoly over biblical archaeology. So they want to dethrone him."

Better still, from the perspective of other interested parties: Once Finkelstein retreats from the throne, King David returns to it.

He has persisted for three millennia—an omnipresence in art, folklore, churches, and census rolls. To Muslims, he is Daoud, the venerated emperor and servant of Allah. To Christians, he is the natural and spiritual ancestor of Jesus, who thereby inherits David's messianic mantle. To the Jews, he is the father of Israel—the shepherd king anointed by God—and they in turn are his descendants and God's Chosen People. That he might be something lesser, or a myth altogether, is to many unthinkable.

"Our claim to being one of the senior nations in the world, to being a real player in civilization's realm of ideas, is that we wrote this book of books, the Bible," says Daniel Polisar, president of the Shalem Center, the Israeli research institute that helped fund Eilat Mazar's excavation work. "You take David and his kingdom out of the book, and you have a different book. The narrative is no longer a historical work, but a work of fiction. And then the rest of the Bible is just a propagandistic effort to create something that never was. And if you can't find the evidence for it, then it probably didn't happen. That's why the stakes are so high."

The books of the Old Testament outlining the story of David and Solomon consist of scriptures probably written at least 300 years after the fact, by not-so-objective authors. No contemporaneous texts exist to validate their claims. Since the dawn of biblical archaeology, scholars have sought in vain to verify that there really was an Abraham, a Moses, an Exodus, a conquest of Jericho. At the same time, says Amihai Mazar, Eilat's cousin and among Israel's most highly regarded archaeologists, "Almost everyone agrees that the Bible is an ancient text relating to the history of this country during the Iron Age. You can look at it critically, as many scholars do. But you can't ignore the text—you must relate to it."

But, adds Mazar, "you shouldn't seek to prove the text verbatim." And yet multitudes of archaeologists have made that very goal their life's work, beginning with the American scholar and godfather of biblical archaeology William Albright. Among Albright's protégés was the Israeli military titan, politician, and scholar Yigael Yadin. For Yadin and his contemporaries, the Bible was unassailable. As a result, when he uncovered the city gates at the biblical city of Hazor in the late 1950s, Yadin committed what would be a current-day archaeological no-no: Since carbon dating wasn't available, he used the Bible, along with the stratigraphy, to date the pottery found inside the gates. He attributed the gates to the exalted tenth-century B.C. empire of Solomon—because the First Book of Kings said so.

The problem with relying on this particular chapter of the Bible is that it was added long after Solomon died in 930 B.C., when Israel had split into two parts—Judah in the south and Israel in the north. "Gezer was the most southerly city in the northern kingdom of Israel, while Hazor was in the most northern realm, and Megiddo was an economic hub in the center," says Tel Aviv University archaeologist Norma Franklin. "So it would be important to the people writing this story to lay claim to all of this territory. To Yadin, the Bible said so and that was it. Three gates—they all have to be Solomon's."

Today, many scholars (including Franklin and her colleague Finkelstein) doubt that all three gates are Solomonic, while others (Amihai Mazar, for example) think they could be. But all of them reject Yadin's circular reasoning, which in the early 1980s helped spawn a backlash movement of "biblical minimalism," led by scholars at the University of Copenhagen. To the minimalists, David and Solomon were simply fictitious characters. The credibility of that position was undercut in 1993, when an excavation team in the northern Israel site of Tel Dan dug up a black basalt stela inscribed with the phrase "House of David." Solomon's existence, however, remains wholly unverified.

Absent more evidence, we're left with the decidedly drab tenth-century B.C. biblical world that Finkelstein first proposed in a 1996 paper—not a single great kingdom replete with monumental buildings but instead a scruffy landscape of disparate, slowly gelling powers: the Philistines to the south, Moabites to the east, Israelites to the north, Aramaeans farther north, and yes, perhaps, a Judaeen insurgency led by a young shepherd in not-so-dazzling Jerusalem. Such an interpretation galls Israelis who regard David's capital as their bedrock. Many of the excavations undertaken in Jerusalem are financially backed by the City of David Foundation, whose director of international development, Doron Spielman, freely admits, "When we raise money for a dig, what inspires us is to uncover the Bible—and that's indelibly linked with sovereignty in Israel."

Unsurprisingly, this agenda does not sit well with the Jerusalem residents who happen to be Palestinian. Many excavations take place in the eastern part of the city, where their families have dwelled for generations but stand to be displaced if such projects morph into Israeli settlement claims. From the Palestinian perspective, the scurrying for archaeological evidence to justify a people's sense of belonging misses the point. As East Jerusalem resident and archaeology professor Hani Nur el-Din says, "When I see Palestinian women making the traditional pottery from the early Bronze Age, when I smell the *taboon* bread baked in the same tradition as the fourth or fifth millennium B.C., this is the cultural DNA. In Palestine there's no written document, no historicity—but still, it's history."

Most Israeli archaeologists would prefer that their work not be used as a political wedge. This, nonetheless, is the way of young nations. As Bar-Ilan University archaeology professor Avraham Faust observes, "The Norwegians relied on Viking sites to create a separate identity from their Swedish and Danish rulers. Zimbabwe is named after an archaeological site. Archaeology is a very convenient tool for creating national identities."

That is one way in which Israel differs from other countries. Its national identity came well before any digging. What's dug up can only confirm that identity...or not.

"This place was hell," says Tom Levy cheerfully as he stands over an open pit filled with ancient coal-black slag. Sprawling around him and his volunteer undergraduates from the University of California, San Diego is a 25-acre copper production site—and adjacent to it, a large fortress complex that includes the ruins of 3,000-year-old guardhouses. Apparently the sentinels lived practically on top of the smelting operations, while overseeing a presumably reluctant labor force. "When you have industrial production of this scale, you have to have a procurement system for food and water," Levy continues. "I can't prove it, but I think that the only people that are going to be working in this rather miserable environment are either slaves—or undergrads. The point is, simple tribal societies couldn't do something like this."

Levy, an anthropologist, first came to southern Jordan in 1997 to examine metallurgy's role in social evolution. The lowland district of Faynan, where the blue-green glitter of malachite can be seen from a distance, was an obvious place to study. It also happened to be where the American rabbi and archaeologist Nelson Glueck unabashedly proclaimed in 1940 that he had discovered the Edomite mines controlled by King Solomon. Subsequent British excavators believed they had found evidence that Glueck was off by some three centuries and that Edom actually dated to the seventh century B.C. But when Levy started probing the site known as Khirbat en Nahas (Arabic for "ruins of copper"), the samples he sent off to Oxford for radiocarbon dating confirmed that Glueck had been on the right track: This was a tenth-century copper-production site—and, Levy adds pointedly, "the closest copper source to Jerusalem."

The team headed by Levy and his Jordanian colleague Mohammad Najjar has uncovered a four-chambered gate similar to ones found at sites in Israel that might date to the tenth-century B.C. A few miles from the mines, they've excavated a cemetery of more than 3,500 tombs dating to the same period—perhaps filled with the remains of Iron Age mountain nomads known from ancient Egyptian sources as Shasu, who Levy thinks may have been "corralled at certain points in time and forced to work in the mines." Most work in the mines appears to have ceased by the end of the ninth century—and the so-called "disruption layer" uncovered by Levy's students may explain why.

They found in this layer 22 date pits, which they dated to the tenth century B.C., along with Egyptian artifacts such as a lion-headed amulet and a scarab, both from the time of the pharaoh Shoshenq I. That ruler's invasion of the region shortly after Solomon's death is chronicled in the Old Testament and at the Temple of Amun at Karnak. "I definitely believe that Shoshenq disrupted metal production here at the end of the tenth century," says Levy. "The Egyptians in the Third Intermediate Period weren't strong enough to field an occupying force, which is why you don't see Egyptian bread molds and other material culture here. But they could organize some pretty big military campaigns—strong enough to upset these petty kingdoms, to make sure they wouldn't be a threat to them. That's what I think Shoshenq did here."

The "hell" that Levy has unearthed at Khirbat en Nahas could prove to be hell for the Finkelstein school of low chronology. Levy's copper mines may not be as sexy as King David's palace or the perch overlooking the battle of David and Goliath. But Levy's excavation work spans more time and area than those of Eilat Mazar and Yosef Garfinkel, with far more extensive use of radiocarbon analysis to determine the age of his site's stratigraphic layers. "All scholars dealing with Edom in the last two generations claimed that Edom didn't exist as a state before the eighth century B.C.," says Amihai Mazar. "But Levy's radiocarbon dates have their own story, and that story is related to the tenth to ninth century B.C., and no one can claim that they're incorrect."

In fact, that is precisely what Levy's critics are doing. Some deemed his first 46 datings insufficient to justify reordering an entire chronology for Edom. For his second round of C-14 analysis, Levy doubled the number of samples and meticulously selected charcoal from shrubs with verifiable outer growth rings.

Despite the high cost of C-14 analysis—more than \$500 for a single olive pit—the technique isn't a silver bullet. "Carbon-14 doesn't help you solve all this controversy," says Eilat Mazar. "You have the plus or minus"—a margin of error of about 40 years. "You have different laboratories bringing different interpretations. You have debates about the whole C-14 issue." Indeed, Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar have been locked in an ongoing tussle over the dating of a single stratum at Tel Rehov, a Bronze and



Iron Age city just west of the Jordan River. Mazar contends that the stratum could be Solomonic. Finkelstein says it's from the later Omride dynasty, named for Omri, Ahab's father. The gap between the two eras is about 40 years.

"Many of the radiocarbon dates for this period cover exactly the range that's under debate," Amihai Mazar says, chuckling wearily. "Not before and not after. It's been this way for 15 years."

"You can find evidence in radiocarbon for David being a villager in Norway in the sixth century A.D.!" declares Israel Finkelstein—exaggerating to make a point, as he is prone to doing. "But look, I enjoy reading everything Tom writes about Khirbat en Nahas. It has brought all sorts of ideas to me. I myself would never dig in such a place—too hot! For me, archaeology is about having a good time. You should come to Megiddo—we live in an air-conditioned B&B next to a nice swimming pool."

This is how Finkelstein begins his rebuttals, with amiable preambles that cannot conceal the Mephisto-like gleam in his eyes. For a scholar, the Tel Aviv archaeologist has a highly visceral manner—leaning his tall, bearded frame into a visitor's face, waving his large hands, modulating his baritone with Shakespearean agility.

Yet his charm wears thin for those who have felt the sting of his attacks. "If you want to attract attention, you behave like Finkelstein," says Eilat Mazar. Similarly unamused is Yosef Garfinkel, who says of Finkelstein's recent receipt of a four-million-dollar research grant, "He doesn't even use science—that's the irony. It's like giving Saddam Hussein the Nobel Peace Prize."

Still, Finkelstein's theories strike an intellectually appealing middle ground between biblical literalists and minimalists. "Think of the Bible the way you would a stratified archaeological site," he says. "Some of it was written in the eighth century B.C., some the seventh, and then going all the way to the second B.C. So 600 years of compilation. This doesn't mean that the story doesn't come from antiquity. But the reality presented in the story is a later reality. David, for example, is a historical figure. He did live in the tenth century B.C. I accept the descriptions of David as some sort of leader of an upheaval group, troublemakers who lived on the margins of society. But not the golden city of Jerusalem, not the description of a great empire in the time of Solomon. When the authors of the text describe that, they have in their eyes the reality of their own time, the Assyrian Empire.

"Now, Solomon," he continues with a sigh. "I think I destroyed Solomon, so to speak. Sorry for that! But take Solomon, dissect it. Take the great visit of the Queen of Sheba—an Arabian queen coming to visit, bringing all sorts of exotic commodities to Jerusalem. This is a story which is an impossibility to think about before 732 B.C.,

before the beginning of Arabian trade under Assyrian domination. Take the story of Solomon as the great, you know, trainer in horses and chariots and big armies and so on. The world behind Solomon is the world of the Assyrian century."

Of Levy's mining fortress, Finkelstein says, "I don't buy that it's from the tenth century B.C. There's no way people lived on this site during production. The fire, the toxic fumes—forget it! Instead, look at the fortress of En Hazeva on our side of the Jordan River, built by the Assyrians on the main road to Edom. I see Tom's building as an eighth-century Assyrian fortress parallel to the other one. And look, at the end of the day, his is a marginal site. It's not a stratified city with many eras, like Megiddo and Tel Rehov. Taking a pile of slag and making it the center of the discussion of biblical history—forget it, no way, I reject this absolutely!"

With greater venom, Finkelstein mocks Garfinkel's discoveries at Khirbet Qeiyafa: "Look, you'll never catch me saying, 'I've found one olive pit at a stratum in Megiddo, and this olive pit—which goes against hundreds of carbon-14 determinations—is going to decide the fate of Western civilization.'" He snickers. The lack of pig bones, suggesting it is a Judaeian site? "A gun, but not a smoking gun." The rare inscription found at the site? Probably from Philistine Gath rather than the kingdom of Judah.

The irony is that biblical archaeology's enfant terrible has become the establishment, a Goliath fending off upstart assaults on his chronological order. The proposition that a complex tenth-century B.C. society may have existed on either side of the Jordan River has thrown Finkelstein's vision of the David and Solomon era squarely on the defensive. His many rebuttal papers and his sarcastic tone reflect that defensiveness, and his arguments at times seem a bit desperate. (The notion of living in a fortress next to a copper-smelting site would not seem ludicrous to West Virginia coal miners or residents near Three Mile Island, for example.)

Still, even if Garfinkel can prove that the Judah tribe that begat David dwelled in the fortress of Shaaraim, and Eilat Mazar can document that King David commissioned a palace in Jerusalem, and Tom Levy can successfully demonstrate that King Solomon oversaw copper mines in Edom, this does not a glorious biblical dynasty make. How much digging before the argument is settled?

Many archaeologists question whether the obsessive scramble to prove the biblical narrative is a healthy enterprise. One of them, Tel Aviv University's Raphael Greenberg, flatly states, "It's bad for archaeology. What we're supposed to contribute is a point of view that isn't available from texts or preconceived notions of history—an alternative vision of the past: relations between rich and poor, between men and women. Something richer, in other words, than just validating the Bible."

But does David, with all of his metaphorical power, cease to matter if his deeds and his empire are ultimately viewed as works of fiction? When I point out to Finkelstein that people all over the world are invested in the greatness of David, I am surprised by his response. "Look, when I'm doing research, I *have* to distinguish between the culture of David and the historical David. David is extremely important for my cultural identity. In the same way, I can celebrate the Exodus without seeing it as a purely historic event. David for me is the David reflected in the later king Hezekiah, the David reflected in the later king Josiah, the David of Zacharias in the eschatological prophecies in which Jerusalem is burned but David is alive, the David who is the connection with the beginning of Christianity. In this sense, David is *everything*. If you want me to say it simplistically, I'm proud that this nobody from nowhere became the center of Western tradition.

"So for me," says Finkelstein, David's dethroner, "David is not a plaque on the wall, not even merely a leader of a tenth-century band. No. Much more than that."

---

**Original URL:**

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/print/2010/12/david-and-solomon/draper-text>