

3 A Low Chronology Update

Archaeology, history and bible

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to present an up-to-date overview of the Low Chronology system for the late Iron I and early Iron II strata in the Levant, a system I first proposed in two articles which were published about a decade ago (Finkelstein 1995, 1996a). These articles have generated a fierce debate (e.g. Ben-Tor 2000; Ben-Tor and Ben-Ami 1998; Mazar 1997), which was a major stimulant behind the introduction of large-scale radiocarbon projects into Iron Age archaeology. And though the gap between my system and the reasonable voice in the traditional camp is narrowing (the ‘extended conventional chronology’—Mazar in the Radiocarbon Dating conference, Oxford 2004; see also Mazar 2004: 31), the dispute is far from being resolved.

The Foundations of the Traditional Chronology

The traditional system for the chronology of the late Iron I and early Iron II strata in the Levant is based on two pillars: (1) The date of Philistine pottery and its implications to the end of the Iron I; (2) The date of the Iron IIA strata in the north. These two pillars are certainly related, but they are not necessarily dependent on each other (*contra* Bunimovitz and Faust 2001: abstract; Mazar 1997). In other words, the acceptance or rejection of one does not call for a similar attitude to the other. And I should say from the outset, these two pillars have very little to do with archaeology. Rather, they are based mainly—the second pillar solely—on the biblical account of the early history of Israel. In other words, this is a unique (and annoying) case in which archaeologists compromised the evidence provided by their own discipline in favor of the one-sided interpretation of the textual material provided by another discipline, material which has been the focus of a fierce dispute since the early 19th century.

The *first pillar* is the Albright/Alt Philistine paradigm (1932: 58; 1944, respectively), according to which:

1. The Philistines were settled by Ramesses III in his strongholds in Canaan immediately after his battles with the Sea Peoples in his eighth year, that is, in 1175 BCE.
2. The biblical Philistines can be equated with the archaeological Philistines of the Iron I.
3. The power of the Iron I Philistines was broken by the expansion of the Israelite empire under King David. And since the accession of King David has been dated—according to the biblical numbers—to ca. 1000 BCE, this datum has been taken to represent the end of the independent chapter of Philistine material culture and the transition from the Iron I to the Iron II (e.g. Dothan 1982: 296).

Results of excavations in three of the major mounds in Philistia—Ashdod, Tel Miqne and Ashkelon—have been presented as perfectly fitting this paradigm. The first phase of the Philistine presence, characterized by locally made Myc III C:1b pottery (also known as Monochrome), was dated to a period starting in ca. 1175 BCE and lasting until the withdrawal of the Egyptians from Canaan a few decades later (e.g. Mazar 1985; Stager 1995). The second phase, characterized by bichrome ware, has been dated thereafter, in the late 12th and 11th centuries BCE. Destruction layers at the end of the Bichrome phase have been dated to ca. 1000 BCE and associated with King David's conquests (e.g. Dothan 1982: 296; B. Mazar 1951).

The *second pillar* which supports the traditional chronology is the reconstruction—according to the biblical testimony—of a great United Monarchy of Israel, established in the course of the military exploits of King David and stabilized in the days of his son Solomon, who ruled over a glamorous, rich and prosperous state. According to this paradigm Solomon engaged in monumental building activities in several administrative centers of his state and hence his empire can be traced archaeologically (e.g. Dever 1997; Stager 2003; Yadin 1970). These ideas—that archaeology can render the biblical descriptions of the United Monarchy historical—go back to the Albright school of thought in the 1930s. Nelson Glueck, for example, virtually 'invented' the smelting plant of King Solomon at Tell el-Khuleifeh ('Pittsburg of Palestine', he called it [1940: 5])—a site which has not produced pre-ca. 700 BCE remains (Pratico 1993).

But it was Yigael Yadin, following his excavations at Hazor and Megiddo in the late 1950s and early 1960s, who 'canonized' this historical reconstruction—and with it the traditional chronology system. Yadin's historical and chronological construct was based on:

1. The dating of the six-chambered gates at Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer to the days of King Solomon, following the biblical text in 1 Kings 9.15 (Yadin 1958).
2. The dating of the two ashlar palaces at Megiddo to the 10th century BCE based on the biblical idea of a glamorous Solomonic empire which was ruled from an elaborate capital in Jerusalem (Yadin 1970).

Two more finds at Megiddo seemed to support Yadin's interpretation: the major city *before* the city of the palaces (Stratum VIA) was destroyed by a terrible fire, and the next city, built on top of the palaces (Stratum IVA), featured the famous stables. Yadin's interpretation (1970) seemed to fit the biblical testimony perfectly: Canaanite Megiddo was devastated by David; the palaces represent the Golden Age of Solomon; their destruction by fire could be attributed to the campaign of Pharaoh Shoshenq I (biblical Shishak) to Palestine (Megiddo is mentioned in Shoshenq I's Karnak list and an unstratified fragment of a Shoshenq I stele was found at the site in the 1920s); and the stables were constructed in the early 9th century BCE, in the days of King Ahab who is reported to have faced Shalmaneser III at Qarqar with a huge force of 2000 chariots.

What's Wrong with the Traditional Chronology

As far as I can judge, not one of the arguments of the traditional chronology can withstand a thorough scrutiny, free of theological or simply romantic bias.

The Iron I

There can be no doubt that the Egypto-Canaanite system of the Late Bronze Age continued to function at least until the days of Ramesses IV (Finkelstein forthcoming). Scarabs of this Pharaoh were found in several clear late Late Bronze contexts, such as Lachish (Lalkin 2004), Cemetery 900 at Tell el-Farah and Beth-shemesh. Stratum IX at Tel Sera produced a hieratic inscription from

year 22+X of an Egyptian Pharaoh—doubtless Ramses III (Goldwasser 1984). And different finds from Deir el-Balah which found their way to the antiquity market hint that the site continued to function in the time of the 20th Dynasty, possibly until the days of Ramses VI (Giveon 1977). In the north of Canaan Megiddo was not destroyed before the days of Ramesses III; in fact, it was probably still occupied in the days of Ramesses VI (Singer 1988–89; Ussishkin 1995). And a group of finds from Beth-shean testify that the Egyptian stronghold there still functioned in the days of Ramesses IV (Finkelstein 1996b: 173).

According to the Philistine paradigm, this is the period of time when the Philistines were settled in Egyptian forts—exactly the kind of sites that are listed above. One could have expected that at least the major sites in Philistia would yield a stratum with a mixed Philisto-Egyptian material culture. This is not the case. Not a single locally made Myc IIIc:1b (‘Monochrome’) sherd has ever been found in any of these strata, even at sites located only a few kilometers away from the main Philistine centers. And no less important—not a single Egyptian 20th-Dynasty vessel (to differ from residual sherds) has been found in any of the Monochrome strata. These phenomena are too widespread to be explained as co-existence between the two cultures—that is, the Philistines took over part of Philistia while Egypt continued to control some sort of a nearby enclave, without any connection between the two parties over a period of several decades (Bietak 1993; Dothan 1992: 97; Redford 1985: 217-18; Singer 1985: 114; Stager 1995).

Bunimovitz and Faust (2001) have traveled far, to seek ethnographic case studies from the Baringo district in Kenya, to show that two distinct cultures can coexist without mixing much of their material traits. But the quantity and variety of contemporary human cultures enable the archaeologist to find a parallel to every historical phenomenon. In fact, ethnography can supply examples to conflicting situations; the task of the archaeologist is to set the rules of comparison. And comparing 20th-century AD African tribes to the 12th-century BCE Egyptian Empire in the Levant, or to the 12th-century BCE migrants from the Aegean basin, is a farce.

In any event, Tel Miqne and Ashdod seem to have supplied evidence that the Monochrome phase postdated the Egyptian rule. In both sites the remains of the two cultures seem to have been found one on top of the other (Finkelstein 1995: 223; Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2001), meaning that the two parties—Egyptians and Philistines—are separated stratigraphically, that is, chronologically and not geographically. There is no clue for the settlement of the Sea People, Philistines included, before the 1140s or 1130s BCE. The early phase of Philistine settlement started approximately at that time and lasted until the end of the 12th century BCE. The Bichrome phase should be dated, accordingly, to the 11th and much of the 10th centuries BCE. The Iron I/Iron IIA transition could not have taken place before the late 10th century BCE.

There is a somewhat humoristic side to all this. One can hardly assume that Tel Miqne and Ashdod were the only cities that had been destroyed earlier than the late Ramesside period. So the only explanation to what *really* happened, according to the traditional view, is the following: One night the Philistines who had already lived in these cities for a few decades (without any distinctive feature in their material culture), engaged in some sort of a wild beer or wine party, got drunk, and put their own cities—their own houses—to the torch. After all, they were Philistines, weren’t they? In any event, the morning after, horrified by what they saw, they rebuilt their devastated cities and continued to live in them. But all this got them a bit homesick, so they decided to start producing monochrome pottery—the kind of pottery that they still remembered from their hometowns, which they had left several decades earlier... The beauty of this theory is that it provides a clue for the Aegean origin of the Philistines: their behavior resembles that of the boorish centaurs, who got drunk and violent in the wedding of Pirithous...

The Early Iron II

Yadin's 'Solomonic' theory was haunted by severe problems from the outset. First, the gate at Megiddo was built *later* than the gates of Hazor and Gezer, as it connects to the Stratum IVA city wall (Ussishkin 1980). Second, similar gates have been discovered at other places in the country, among them sites that date to the late 9th or 8th centuries BCE (Lachish and Tel Ira) and sites built outside the borders of the great United Monarchy *even* according to the maximalist view, for example, the 8th-century gate at Ashdod and the 9th- or 8th-century gate at Kh. Mudeineh eth-Themed in Moab (for the former see Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2001: 243-44; Ussishkin 1990: 77-82; for the latter see Daviau 1997: 225).

Yadin argued that his theory is based on three pillars: stratigraphy, chronology and the biblical text:

Our decision to attribute that layer to Solomon was based primarily on the 1 Kings passage, the stratigraphy and the pottery. But when in addition we found in that stratum a six-chambered, two-towered gate connected to a casemate wall identical in plan and measurement with the gate at Megiddo, we felt sure we had successfully identified Solomon's city. (1970: 67)

Yet, it is clear that Yadin's dating rests only on the biblical text and that in any event, all three pillars cannot withstand a thorough scrutiny. Stratigraphy provides us only with relative chronology and old pots do not carry a date label. Still, some of my opponents argue that the Solomonic strata at Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer were dated according to a well-defined family of vessels—the red-slip and burnished pottery—which dates to the 10th century BCE:

The pottery from this destruction layer included distinctive forms of red-slipped and slipped and hand burnished pottery, which have always been dated to the late 10th century... Thus, on commonly accepted ceramic grounds—not on naive acceptance of the Bible's stories—we dated the Gezer walls and gates to the mid-to-late 10th century. (Dever 2001a: 132)

In fact, the opposite is true; Dever dates this pottery type to the 10th century because it was found in the so called 'Solomonic strata':

The key stratum seems to be Gezer Field III Phase UG3A, which is both very short and historically exceptionally well positioned. It comes after the Solomonic building period, richly documented by biblical and historical data and secured by comparative regional archaeological and architectural criteria combined with comparative pottery criteria. (Holladay 1990: 62-63)

In simpler words, the key stratum is dated by the pottery. The pottery is dated by its relationship to the six-chambered gate, which is, in turn, dated according to the biblical testimony to the days of Solomon; a classical circular reasoning.

This leaves us with the biblical passage of 1 King 9.15—the *only* true pillar in Yadin's theory and the only basis for the entire structure of the archaeology of the 10th century in the entire Levant (and beyond, since the chronology of the Iron Age strata in the Levant reflects on the dating of Iron Age Greek pottery; see, e.g., Coldstream 2003). So this is the moment to take a close look at this crucial verse and its background.

The idea that the book of Kings, which was put in writing not earlier than the late 7th century BCE, includes historic information about the days of King Solomon, who ruled centuries earlier, comes from a broader perception—that the author had access to archival material in Jerusalem, which included documents from the time of Solomon or immediately after his days. This perception, in turn, was based on a still broader theory, advocated by great German biblical scholars such as Leonard Rost (1982 [1926]) and Gerhard von Rad (1966 [1944]: 176-204), that the reign of Solomon should be seen as a period of exceptional enlightenment, during which (or immediately thereafter) great historical works—such as the Succession History—had been written in Jerusalem

(see also Halpern 2001). And this theory was founded on the biblical testimony—another perfect circular reasoning.

Regardless of the chronology debate, archaeology has produced a totally different picture. In the 10th century Jerusalem was a small, poor, unfortified village (Finkelstein 2001; Ussishkin 2003); meticulous surveys show that the highlands of Judah—the backbone of the supposed great United Monarchy—was sparsely inhabited in the 10th century by a dozen of small villages, with a population of no more than a few thousand people (Lehmann 2003). There is no sign of monumental building activity in 10th-century Judah; there is no sign of industrialization of agricultural output; there is no evidence for mass production of pottery; there is no mark of settlement hierarchy. And most important of all, over a century of excavations in every sector of Jerusalem and in every significant site in Judah failed to reveal any evidence for a meaningful scribal activity and literacy in the 10th century (Finkelstein 1999; Jamieson-Drake 1991). *All* these characteristics—of an advanced state and a literate society—appeared much later, in the late 8th and 7th centuries BCE, when Judah grew to become a fully developed bureaucratic state (for the pottery see Zimhoni 1997: 170-72; for the industrialization of the agricultural output see Eitan-Katz 1994; for the weights see Kletter 1991; for ostraca see Sass 1993; Renz 1995: 38-39; for seals and seal impressions see Avigad and Sass 1997: 50-51). To sum up this point, modern archaeology has proven that the idea of an archive in Jerusalem, which kept genuine 10th-century records, is an absurd notion which is founded on the biblical testimony rather than on any actual evidence. Needless to say, this is the demise of the 10th-century anchor of 1 Kings 9.15.

But what *is* the reality behind this verse? There is no question that the biblical description of the United Monarchy draws a picture of an idyllic golden age; and that it is wrapped in the theological and ideological goals of the time of the authors (e.g. Finkelstein and Silberman 2001: 123-45; Knauf 1991; Miller 1997; Niemann 1997; Van Seters 1983: 307-12). The entire description of the reign of King Solomon in the book of Kings is based on two foundations: realities of the time of the compilation of the text, or a bit earlier, and the ideology of late-monarchic Judah (Knauf 1991; Finkelstein and Silberman forthcoming). The mention of the three great *Northern* cities in 1 Kings 9.15 could have been taken from 8th-century BCE realities, before the fall of the North, still remembered in Judah and projected into its semi-mythical early history, with the goal of looking at a promising future based on that mythical, glamorous past (for somewhat similar views see Knauf 1997: 91-95; Niemann 2000). Roaming Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer with this verse at hand to look for 10th-century monuments, is therefore a terribly naive endeavor.

The same holds true for assigning destruction layers in the north to King David in ca. 1000 BCE. There is no clue for great Davidic wars of conquests (which could have hardly been undertaken with a population of maybe 500 adult males in 10th-century Judah); the biblical account of David's wars is influenced by 9th- and possibly 8th-century realities (Na'aman 2002); and putting aside the forty-year reign formula for David and Solomon, we do not know when exactly in the 10th century David ruled.

The conventional theory raises other severe historical and archaeological problems, beyond the interpretation of the biblical narrative and the archaeological record according to the biblical narrative:

1. The rise of territorial states in the Levant was an outcome of the westward expansion of the Assyrian empire in the early 9th century BCE. Ancient Near Eastern records leave little doubt that all major states in the region—Aram Damascus, Moab, Ammon and northern Israel—developed in the 9th century BCE (Finkelstein 1999; for the Aramaeans further to the north see, e.g. Sader 2000). It is extremely difficult to envision a great empire ruled from the almost empty, marginal region of the southern highlands (and from a small village) a century before this process.

2. The northern part of Israel yielded evidence for two major destruction horizons between the end of the Late Bronze Age and the Assyrian conquest: Megiddo VIA and Megiddo VA–IVB and their contemporary strata. Most supporters of the traditional chronology have dated the first to ca. 1000 BCE and assigned it to King David and the second to the late 10th century BCE and assigned it to the campaign of Pharaoh Shoshenq I (e.g. Dever 1997: 239–43; Harrison 2003; Yadin 1970; and Stager 2003 for Shoshenq I). This has caused a major historical problem: the well documented assault of Aram Damascus on the Northern Kingdom in the 830s BCE, mentioned in reliable biblical prophetic stories and backed by the Tel Dan stele, is left with no destruction layer, not even at Tel Dan, which must have been conquered by Hazael.
3. A tomb at Kefar Veradim in the north yielded an Assyrian-shaped gadrooned bronze bowl (Alexandre 2002a) with Iron IIA pottery assemblage (Alexandre 2002b). The former does not appear before the 9th century BCE. Applying the traditional chronology brings about an absurd situation in which the inscription is dated to the 11th century BCE, the pottery to the 10th century BCE and the bowl probably to the 9th century BCE (Sass forthcoming).
4. Most problematic: Over a century of archaeological explorations in Jerusalem—the capital of the glamorous *biblical* United Monarchy—failed to reveal evidence for any meaningful 10th-century building activity. The famous stepped stone structure, which has been presented as the most important United Monarchy remain (e.g. Cahill 2003; Mazar 1997: 164), was probably built *earlier* and renovated during the centuries (Finkelstein 2001). Pottery which dates to the 9th if not the 8th century BCE was found between its surface courses (Steiner 1994: 19). The common pretext, that the 10th-century BCE remains were eradicated by later activity, is misleading, as monumental fortifications from the Middle Bronze and from the late Iron II did survive later occupations (Reich and Shukron 2000).

Beyond all this there is the problem of the synchronization with the neighboring lands. Regarding the correlation between Levantine and Greek pottery sequences, ‘the “low chronology” recently advanced in Israel offers the more credible pace of development in the Aegean’ (Coldstream 2003: 256). And concerning Syria, ‘considerations of historical and archaeological nature point to the beginning of the 9th century as a reliable turning point from the Iron I to Iron II’ (Mazzoni 2000: 121).

An Alternative Chronology

So much for the negative evidence; more straightforward clues come from two sites related to the Omride Dynasty—Samaria in the highlands and Jezreel in the Valley.

Ashlar blocks uncovered in the foundations of Palace 1723 at Megiddo which dates to Stratum VA–IVB—the layer which Yadin associated with the time of King Solomon—carry unique masons’ marks (Lamon and Shipton 1939: 25). These are found in one other site, in fact mainly—possibly only—in one other building in Israel—the palace of the Omride Dynasty at Samaria (Reisner, Fisher and Lyon 1924: I, 119–20; II, Pl. 90: e–f). These masons’ marks are so distinctive that they must have been executed by the same group of masons. The similarity in the construction techniques between the two edifices was first noticed by Clarence Fisher (1929: 58), the excavator of both Megiddo and Samaria, and John Crowfoot (1940: 146), the second excavator of Samaria; was forgotten with the beginning of the Solomonic frenzy (Guy 1931) and has recently been revived by Norma Franklin (Chapter 18, this volume). However, one palace was dated to the 10th century and the other to the 9th century BCE. There are only two alternatives here: either to push

the Megiddo building ahead to the 9th century BCE, or to pull the Samaria palace back to the 10th century BCE. Needless to say, the former alternative, which is supported by historical sources, is the only possibility. The biblical testimony, that Samaria was built by the Omrides, is backed by Assyrian texts that relate to the Northern Kingdom as *bit omri*, that is, ‘the House of Omri’—the typical genre of calling a state after the founder of its capital.

Excavations at Jezreel, located less than ten miles to the east of Megiddo, revealed equally surprising results. The destruction layer of the Omride compound, dated to the mid-9th century BCE, yielded a pottery assemblage identical to the Megiddo VA–IVB assemblage, which has traditionally been dated to the late 10th century BCE (Zimhoni 1997: 38–39). In a desperate attempt to save the idea of a great United Monarchy, Ben-Tor (2000) suggested that the Jezreel pottery belongs to an earlier phase at the site. This means that the large-scale leveling operations, transportation of fills, deposition of the earth in its place, and the construction of the casemate compound did not damage the old vessels—which were still standing there intact... Miracles do happen in the Holy Land, but this is a bit too much. So in this case too we need either to push the Megiddo assemblage ahead or to pull the Jezreel assemblage back. Once again the former is the only option, as the prophetic biblical story on the killing of Joram King of Israel and Ahaziah King of Judah by Jehu is supported by the Tel Dan Stele (Schniedewind 1996). Let me repeat this: in both cases—of the mason’s marks and the pottery assemblages—the only alternative is to down-date the Megiddo palaces to the first half of the 9th century BCE.

So far I have dealt with traditional archaeology and biblical exegesis. Can we add to these circumstantial considerations more accurate pieces of evidence?

The first clue *may* come from Egypt. Münger (2003) has dealt with a group of ‘mass produced’ Egyptian amulets found in large numbers in the Levant. They seem to have been mass made in the Delta in the time of Pharaohs Siamun and Sheshonq I, who both ruled in the 10th century BCE. (Needless to say, the ostensibly Egyptian-based dating of Sheshonq’s campaign to 926 BCE is based solely on the biblical testimony.) Yet, in Israel these amulets appear for the first time in the Megiddo VIA horizon, which was previously dated to the 11th century BCE. At Dor five such amulets were found in one room with a late Iron I (Megiddo VIA horizon) pottery assemblage (Gilboa, Sharon and Zorn 2004). Many of the objections to this idea may be sound, but Münger’s theory is still a valid (if not preferable) possibility.

The second and main independent clue is radiocarbon measurements. In order not to repeat arguments that have recently been published, I just wish to note that:

1. Eliezer Piasetzky and I have shown that much of the data published so far—from Tel Dor, Tel Rehov, Tel Hadar and Megiddo—fit better the Low Chronology system (Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2003a).
2. Bruins, van der Plicht and Mazar (2003) have published a second series of radiocarbon readings from Tel Rehov, which they interpret as supporting the traditional chronology. Yet, Piasetzky and I have shown that there is a lower alternative to the interpretation of these measurements, which better fits the general picture provided by both radiocarbon and stratigraphy (Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2003b, 2003c). In fact, when the ceramic and stratigraphic arguments are added to the interpretation of the calibration curve, even the new Tel Rehov results support the Low Chronology (Finkelstein 2004 and Chapter 17, this volume). Stager’s festive statement that the Tel Rehov readings put ‘the last nail in the coffin of Finkelstein’s theory’ (Holden 2003: 229, 231) has therefore turned into a boomerang before the ink dried.

Arguments Raised Against the Low Chronology

Some have tried to gain a moment of fame by attempting to participate in the hot chronology debate, with quite amusing results, which demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of the whole issue. Harrison's long discussion of the Megiddo evidence (2003) is meaningless, as it is based on the traditional arguments: King David destroyed Megiddo VIA; Solomon built Megiddo VA–IVB, and so on. And Gal's statement (2003: 149) that 'the identification of Horvat Rosh Zayit with biblical Cabul...and its association with the "Land of Cabul" relate it to both King Solomon and Hiram of Tyre...thus providing it with an appropriate historical–geographical basis' (he means chronological basis) is the ultimate manifestation of the circular reasoning syndrome.

But there have been serious challenges, which needed to be addressed. Following are three examples which I have not treated in this article so far:

1. The *Taanach* argument of Lawrence Stager (in a lecture in San Francisco, 1998; 2003: 66). Pharaoh Sheshonq I, who campaigned in Palestine in the second half of the 10th century BCE, mentions Taanach in his Karnak list. According to Stager Taanach features only one destruction layer—the one corresponding to a Megiddo stratum which is traditionally dated to the 10th century BCE. Yet, a re-evaluation of the Taanach finds (Finkelstein 1998) clearly points to an earlier stratum which was also destroyed in a fierce fire. This provides a conflagration layer at Taanach for whoever is seeking a Sheshonq destruction.
2. The *density of strata* argument, raised by Mazar (1997: 163) and Ben-Tor (2000). If the date of 10th-century BCE strata is lowered to the early 9th century, too many strata are left in northern Israel for the relatively short period of time until the Assyrian takeover in 732 BCE. There are several answers to this argument: first, the traditional dating does the same to earlier strata; second, the number of strata depends on the quality of excavations; third, the history of border sites (such as Hazor—the subject of Ben-Tor's complaint) was more turbulent than that of inland sites (such as Megiddo).
3. The *how can you accept one biblical testimony and reject another* argument (e.g. Ben-Tor 2000: 12, 14; Mazar 1999: 40 note 38). Put simply, the question is: How can one reject the historicity of the biblical testimony on the building activities of Solomon and at the same time accept the historicity of the verses on the construction of Samaria by Omri? The answer is surprisingly simple: accepting the historicity of one verse and rejecting another is *exactly* the meaning of two centuries of biblical scholarship. As I have mentioned above, the biblical description of the Solomonic state is idealized, with many references to realities of much later times in Israelite history (e.g. the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba in Jerusalem and the trade expeditions from Ezion-geber, which must reflect the participation of Judah, under Assyrian domination, in the intensive Arabian trade). In fact, there is not a single major item in that description, which cannot be explained on late-Monarchic background (Knauf 1991; Finkelstein and Silberman forthcoming). The description of the Omride state is minimal, negative, but far more accurate historically. It is enough to mention again the role of the Elisha cycle in the events involving the fall of the Omride Dynasty, including the role of Hazael King of Damascus, which is backed by the Tel Dan stele.
4. Finally, the *Finkelstein stands alone* argument of William Dever (2001b: 68) is just too tempting to be ignored. The number of supporters of each camp in this debate depends on who and how one counts. If researchers directly involved in the debate are counted, the majority, I suspect, is not on Dever's side. The reader should also pay attention to the most illuminating fact, that all desertions are from the traditional to the low chronology.

Dever has now prepared the ground for his own desertion: ‘Caution is indicated at the moment; but one should allow the possibility of slightly lower 10th–9th centuries BCE dates’ (in the abstract of his lecture in the Radiocarbon Dating conference at Oxford, 2004). In any event, looking at the high-quality scholars on my side (see the temporary and far from complete list in Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 66-67), I can only hope to be always able to stand similarly alone.

Conclusion

Lowering the date of 11th-century BCE assemblages to the early-to-mid 10th century, and 10th-century BCE assemblages to the early 9th century, with the late Iron I/early Iron IIA transition fixed in the late 10th century BCE, cures all the maladies of the traditional Levantine chronology. It means:

1. Placing the Greek Protogeometric pottery from Dor, Tel Hadar and Tel Rehov in its more proper place (from the Aegean perspective, see, e.g., Coldstream 2003).
2. Harmonizing the evidence for dating the pottery sequences in Israel and Syria.
3. Dating state formation in Israel together with other areas of the Levant and western Asia, in the early 9th century BCE.
4. Providing the ‘missing’ destruction layer in the north for the Aramaean assault on the Northern Kingdom in the mid-9th century BCE.
5. Dating the identical mason marks at Megiddo and Samaria to the same period.
6. Dating the identical pottery assemblages of Megiddo VA–IVB and Jezreel in the same time zone.
7. Avoiding an absurd reconstruction of a great empire ruled from an empty highlands and a tiny village.
8. Reconstructing a logical history of the Levant in the 10th and 9th centuries BCE which is compatible with the general picture of the history of the ancient Near East.
9. And no less important, putting the strata in their proper place according to recent radiometric results.

The only disadvantage of the Low Chronology—at least for some—is that it pulls the carpet from under the biblical image of a great Solomonic United Monarchy and puts the spotlight on Northern Kingdom of the Omride Dynasty as the real first prosperous state of early Israel. Here is the dilemma: How can one diminish the stature of the ‘good guys’ and let the ‘bad guys’ prevail?

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