

## THE BOOK OF JOSHUA, PART I ITS EVALUATION BY NONEVIDENCE <sup>1</sup>

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No other biblical book has been as thoroughly reviewed by the archaeological community as Joshua. The reason for this interest is that no other book of the Bible appears to be as susceptible to archaeological investigation as the book of Joshua. The stories of the patriarchs provide few concrete details that Syro-Palestinian archaeologists could investigate; nor do the other Pentateuchal books, which are largely set outside of Canaan.<sup>2</sup> Joshua, on the other hand, describes events which seemingly occur in Late Bronze Age Canaan. Among its many stories is the destruction by Joshua and the Israelites of named cities. It seems obvious that the book of Joshua is an ideal candidate for archaeological investigation. Over the past decades connections between every city mentioned in the book and identifiable tells have been made.<sup>3</sup> The arguments and conclusions have been made on the basis of biblical, archaeological, and geographical considerations.

The proponents of the Conquest Theory have been in the forefront in gathering information about "biblical" sites with the intention of supporting the theory that the Israelites took Canaan by military conquest.<sup>4</sup> For the past thirty years, however, there has been a growing

<sup>1</sup>This paper is a revised and expanded version of research directed by William H. Shea, to whom it is dedicated in honor of his sixty-fifth year; cf. David Merling Sr., *The Book of Joshua: Its Theme and Role in Archaeological Discussions*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 23 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1997), 238-262.

<sup>2</sup>Recent examples of those who have worked on Egyptian/Exodus issues: James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Frank J. Yurco, "Merneptah's Canaanite Campaign and Israel's Origins," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 27-55; Abraham Malamat, "The Exodus: Egyptian Analogies," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 15-26; Donald B. Redford, "Observations on the Sojourn of the Bene-Israel," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 57-66; William H. Shea, "Date of the Exodus," in *ISBE* (1982), 2:230-238.

<sup>3</sup>Merling, *The Book of Joshua*, 115-145.

<sup>4</sup>William G. Dever, "Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus?" in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 76-77.

dissatisfaction with the Conquest Theory and, by extension, with the explanation of the book of Joshua as to how the Israelites came to occupy Canaan.<sup>5</sup> The primary problem has been that archaeologists have not found evidence that can be correlated with the book.<sup>6</sup> In fact, some have concluded that both the Conquest Theory and the book of Joshua have

<sup>5</sup>Merling, 59-62.

<sup>6</sup>Table 1 summarizes the archaeological data for Joshua. The biblical place names are followed by the archaeological sites suggested for them. This table also shows whether or not material cultural remains from the Late Bronze Age (LB, LBI, LBII)—the time most likely for the events of Joshua to have occurred—have been found at those sites. The last column shows that at no site so far excavated and associated with the book of Joshua has any *specific* evidence been found of Joshua or the Israelites.

| Sites, Biblical and (Archaeological)             | LB Settlement | LBI Destruction | LBII Destruction | *Specific Mention |
|--|---------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| T es-Sultan                                      | ✓             | ?               | —                | —                 |
| Ai (et-Tell)                                     | —             | —               | —                | —                 |
| Makkedah (T es-Safi)<br>(Kh el-Qom)              | ✓<br>?        | ?<br>—          | ?<br>—           | —<br>—            |
| Libnah (T es-Safi)<br>(T Bornat)<br>(T Judeideh) | ✓<br>?<br>?   | ?<br>?<br>?     | ?<br>?<br>?      | —<br>—<br>—       |
| Lachish (T ed-Duweir)                            |               | —               | ✓                | —                 |
| Eglon (T el-Hesi)<br>(T °Aitun)                  | ✓<br>?        | ?<br>?          | ?<br>?           | —<br>—            |
| Hebron (T Hebron)                                | ✓             | ?               | ?                | —                 |
| Debir (T Beit Mirsim)<br>(Kh Rabûd)              | ✓<br>✓        | ✓<br>?          | ✓<br>?           | —<br>—            |
| Hazor (T el-Qedah)                               | ✓             | ✓               | ✓                | —                 |
| Madon (T Q Hiṭṭin)                               | ✓             | —               | ✓                | —                 |
| Shimron (T Shimron)                              | ✓             | ?               | ?                | —                 |
| Achshaph (T Keisan)                              | ✓             | —               | ✓                | —                 |

\*Specific mention of Joshua or Israelites.

been disproved by the archaeological evidence.<sup>7</sup>

Specifically, excavated sites such as Jericho (Tell es Sultan), Ai (et-Tell), and Gibeon (el-Jib) have provided no substantiating evidence for the accounts of the book of Joshua. An obvious question arises from this situation: "What sort of conclusion is to be reached, when carefully excavated archaeological evidence does not seem to meet the minimum requirements of the historical implications of the biblical texts?"<sup>8</sup> The result has been a growing consensus that the biblical text of Joshua is historically unreliable. Such a conclusion calls for a reassessment of the relationship between Joshua and archaeology, especially since some significant considerations have been omitted in previous discussions.

To state the problem as clearly as possible, I use J. M. Miller to frame the dilemma of et-Tell:

That biblical Ai is to be equated with present-day et-Tell is an obvious conclusion, therefore, and one which scholars were agreed upon before any excavations were undertaken at the site. According to Josh 7-8, Ai was a fortified city at the time of the Israelite invasion (this is implied by the description of Joshua's military tactics and confirmed by the reference to the city gate in 7. 5); it was conquered and burned by Joshua; and it remained "forever a heap of ruins" (*t'el 'olām*; 8. 28) from that day onward. However, archaeological excavations at et-Tell have indicated rather conclusively that the site was virtually unoccupied following c. 2000 B.C.E. except for a small unfortified village which stood on the old ruins c. 1200-1050 B.C.E. (Marquet-Krause, Callaway). Thus, if the conquest occurred at any time during MB or LB, Ai/et-Tell would have been nothing more than a desolate ruin.<sup>9</sup>

Miller's deduction about et-Tell and the Israelite conquest is based not on evidence found at et-Tell but, rather, on the lack of evidence. In other words, archaeologists discovered nothing to substantiate the account of the book of Joshua. What archaeologists expected to find at et-Tell was one or more Late Bronze Age levels of occupation ended by destruction. They might have been satisfied to have found at least a Late Bronze Age settlement, but their excavations found no settlement at all. Thus, Miller's conclusion is that "the archaeological situation at et-Tell cannot be squared with the biblical claims,"<sup>10</sup> and "what archaeology does not

<sup>7</sup>Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources* (New York: Brill, 1994), 158.

<sup>8</sup>J. Maxwell Miller, "Archaeology and the Israelite Conquest of Canaan: Some Methodological Observations," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 109 (1977): 88.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

confirm, indeed, what archaeology denies, is the explanation provided by the narrative as to how the ruins came to be."<sup>11</sup>

Miller's conclusions raise the question, what does the *archaeology* of et-Tell "deny"? His comment suggests that he has confused the archaeologist with archaeology. Miller, as an archaeologist,<sup>12</sup> has noted et-Tell's lack of archaeological evidence for a settlement during the Late Bronze Age. His conclusion is that this lack of evidence is evidence against the reliability of the book of Joshua. A major point of the present article is that there is an intrinsic difference between the evidence which archaeologists find and what they do not find. While this statement may seem sophomoric, in current archaeological discussions what archaeologists have found and what they have not found are treated as equally conclusive evidence.

The stories of the book of Joshua are in seeming conflict with archaeology not because of the evidence of archaeology but because of the lack of evidence (i.e., "nonevidence"). The archaeological community needs to more fully discuss the nature of archaeological nonevidence before it attempts to use nonevidence as a means of evaluating the historicity of the book of Joshua or any other ancient literature. Such an evaluation is the first step in understanding the relationship between archaeology and the Bible, for, in reality, nonevidence is currently the mechanism used, more than any other, to specify that relationship.

### *The Fallacy of Negative Proof*

The pragmatic reality is that current and past archaeological discussions are built on two types of "data": what is found and what is not found. Both forms of "data" are mixed to produce archaeological explanations. The already cited words of Miller are an example of what can be shown at every level of archaeological explanation.<sup>13</sup> Although nonevidence has been assumed to be a form of "data" that is methodologically sound, the only real archaeological data are those found. Data not collected or not found constitute nonevidence, an argument

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Miller prefers to be identified as a biblical historian, but his fine survey work in Jordan and his use of the archaeological data in his many articles and books identify him as an archaeologist. See idem, "Reflections on the Study of Israelite History," in *What Archaeology Has to Do with Faith*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992), 60.

<sup>13</sup>Differentiations are made between archaeological periods, ethnic groups, and literary abilities of ethnic groups, partly based on what was not found in one stratum and what was found in another. Such explanations are examples of the mixing of evidence and "nonevidence" as data.

from silence which does not have the same weight as data that are found.

Almost thirty years ago David Hackett Fischer compiled a list of the false assumptions made by historians. One of those false assumptions is the “fallacy of the negative proof.” Wrote Fischer, “*The fallacy of the negative proof* is an attempt to sustain a factual proposition merely by negative evidence. It occurs whenever a historian declares that there is no evidence that *X* is the case, and then proceeds to affirm or assume that not-*X* is the case” (emphasis supplied).<sup>14</sup>

Applying Fischer’s dictum to Near Eastern archaeology, it may be said that the assumption that a specific point of an ancient literary account is disproved because one does not know of or cannot find any evidence of its historicity, is a historical fallacy. To admit that one has no information does not prove the information does not exist. Fischer summarizes: “A good many scholars would prefer not to know that some things exist. But not knowing that a thing exists is different from knowing that it does not exist. The former is never sound proof of the latter. Not knowing that something exists is simply not knowing.”<sup>15</sup>

More specifically, applying Fischer’s description of the fallacy of negative proof to Miller’s statements above, then, the archaeologists at et-Tell did not find evidence of a settlement during the Middle Bronze or Late Bronze Ages. Making assumptions beyond the data goes beyond the evidence and, therefore, cannot be the same as evidence. When Miller suggests that “archaeology denies” the biblical account, he has assumed “the fallacy of the negative proof” as the basis of his conclusion. What archaeologists do know is that the excavators found no evidence for a Late Bronze Age settlement at et-Tell. What archaeologists do not know is *why* they did not find any evidence. Miller has filled in that blank himself.

### *The Serendipitous Nature of Archaeology*

There are a number of possible explanations why evidence could be lacking at a given archaeological site. Archaeology is dependent on the skill of the archaeologist, the serendipitous nature of the finds, the arbitrary and incomplete methods of selecting a tell’s excavation areas, and the limited information gathered. Some archaeologists have acknowledged the limits of archaeology. William Dever, for example, has written that what archaeologists

<sup>14</sup>David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 47. I was alerted to Fischer’s work by James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10-11.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 48.

find is "pure luck."<sup>16</sup> While he didn't mean that remark to be taken totally at face value, it does acknowledge the tentative nature of archaeological data. Theoretical constructs are mirages when built on "silent" evidence (Mazar's term for what I call nonevidence).<sup>17</sup>

Miller has called nonevidence "negative archaeological evidence" as though something not found testifies in a negative way.<sup>18</sup> The reality is that finding nothing is nonevidence. Miller himself advises caution when evidence is lacking, thus admitting the limitations of nonevidence<sup>19</sup> and warning other archaeologists of the potential danger of using "negative archaeological evidence." But his "negative archaeological evidence" is in reality nonevidence and as such has no value because it does not materially exist. Archaeologists once denied the historical existence of the Hittites because archaeological evidence had not been found. But when material evidence was discovered, the nonevidence, not surprisingly, disappeared. The argument from silence, which had been used as "evidence" for the Hittites' nonexistence, remained what it was, nonevidence because in Fischer's terms, it was based on fallacious assumptions.<sup>20</sup> The unique nature of archaeology, which is at least as much art as science, makes the use of nonevidence (what is not found) even more problematic.

The essential difference between what is found and what is not found is that, although the interpretation of collected data may change, the collected data itself, whether a soil layer or artifact, has its own, verifiable existence.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, nonevidence has no existence in itself. It is an assumed reality.

Currently there is the paradigm shift occurring among Syro-Palestine archaeologists regarding ethnicity and pottery in the Iron 1 period. At one time, a direct link was made between Iron 1 pottery, especially collared-rim

<sup>16</sup>William G. Dever, *Archaeology and Biblical Studies: Retrospects and Prospects*, William C. Winslow Lectures, 1972 (Evanston, IL: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1974), 41, 46.

<sup>17</sup>Amihai Mazar, "The Iron Age I," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 281.

<sup>18</sup>Miller, "Archaeology and the Israelite Conquest of Canaan," 89.

<sup>19</sup>J. Maxwell Miller, "Site Identification: A Problem Area in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palastina-Vereins* 99 (1983): 121.

<sup>20</sup>Perhaps a better term than my own "nonevidence" would be "fallacious evidence."

<sup>21</sup>When an archaeologist discovers a bowl, the purpose of the bowl may be argued as "common" or "cultic," or its identification and/or function may be argued ("lamp," "chalice," "basin" or "drinking," "food preparation" or "storage"), but the bowl itself has its own existence regardless of whether the interpretation is correct or changes over time.

pithoi and Israelite settlements.<sup>22</sup> The primary basis of this connection was the uniqueness of certain pottery forms and their limited distribution in the hill-country of Israel, which is another way of saying, the nonappearance of these pottery forms in other regions. Further excavation, producing additional finds of these “unique” pottery forms outside the hill-country of Israel and more carefully considered conclusions has brought this link between pottery and ethnicity into question.<sup>23</sup> What has happened to the nonevidence, that is, the lack of the “Israelite” pottery forms in “non-Israelite” territories, which was the fundamental datum for previous areas. In fact, that “evidence” never existed. It was the imagined construct of interpreters. It was, in effect, what the theorists wanted it to be. It existed in their mind, not in the evidence.

Mazar has likewise recognized that nondata are a key problem in explaining the Israelite conquest and settlement. He writes, “The subject as a whole is fraught with methodological difficulties, for the silent archaeological evidence may always be interpreted in more ways than one.”<sup>24</sup> Calling it “silent archaeological evidence” suggests that it says nothing, and is an admission by Mazar, whether he recognizes it or not, that it cannot be valued as evidence. Kitchen is well aware of the problem of the attempted use of nonevidence:

Absence of evidence is not, and should not be confused with, evidence of absence. The same criticism is to be leveled at the abuse of this concept in archaeology: the syndrome: “we did not find it, so it never existed!” instead of the more proper formulation: “evidence is currently lacking; we may have missed it or it may have left no trace”; particularly when 5 percent or less of a mound is dug, leaving 95 percent or more untouched, unknown, and so, not in evidence.<sup>25</sup>

### *Nonconfirmation of Invasion Data*

Since the background of most of this discussion of the relationship between archaeology and the biblical stories centers on conclusions deduced from destruction layers, it would be helpful to consider the results of Isserlin’s study of historically-documented invasions. Isserlin

<sup>22</sup>E.g., Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988): 270-285.

<sup>23</sup>Israel Finkelstein, “The Rise of Early Israel Archaeology and Long-term History,” in *The Origin of Early Israel—Current Debate: Biblical Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Shmuel Ahituv and Eliezer D. Oren (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1998), 16-17.

<sup>24</sup>Mazar, 281.

<sup>25</sup>Kenneth A. Kitchen, “New Directions in Biblical Archaeology: Historical and Biblical Aspects,” in *Biblical Archaeology Today: 1990* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), 48.

demonstrates the difficulty of detecting evidence of invasions from the archaeological data, even when historical details are not disputed.<sup>26</sup> Isserlin has compared the literary record of the Norman conquest, the Anglo-Saxon settlement in England, and the Muslim Arab conquest of the Levant with the archaeological evidence of those events. That is to say, he has selected five determinatives of those later invasions as a means of testing what evidences should be expected from the Israelite conquest.

Table 2 summarizes the findings of Isserlin's study. No one disputes the "historicity" of the Norman or Anglo-Saxon conquests, even though, based on the literary evidence, one would expect destructions to be found. However, none of the three invaders (Normans, Anglo-Saxons, or Muslim Arabs) left any material evidence of their conquest for archaeologists to detect.<sup>27</sup> This is true even though, in the literature describing their invasions, destructions are described.<sup>28</sup> If the same archaeological standard were applied to these invasions as is applied to Jericho and Ai, the conclusion could only be that the Normans, Anglo-Saxons, and Muslims never expanded their territory through destructive conquests.

**Table 2**  
**Evidential Remains of the Norman,  
Anglo-Saxon, and Muslim Conquests**

| Item                    | Norman Conquest | Anglo-Saxon Settlement | Muslim Conquest |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Attested destruction | 0               | 0                      | 0               |
| 2. New pottery          | 0               | X                      | 0               |
| 3. Cult constructions   | X               | X                      | X               |
| 4. New names            | X               | X                      | 0               |
| 5. New languages        | X               | X                      | X               |

"0" = no evidence. "X" = evidence

Note. Based on Isserlin 1983: 85-94.

<sup>26</sup>B.S.J. Isserlin, "The Israelite Conquest of Canaan: A Comparative Review of the Arguments Applicable," *PEQ* (*Quarterly Statement*) 115 (1983): 85-94.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

Among the three groups, only the Anglo-Saxons introduced new pottery forms. Isserlin explains the uniqueness of the Anglo-Saxons in this regard. They were a small number of ruling-class gentry and the pottery styles introduced were unique pieces brought with them from their homelands. Isserlin concludes that only elitist populations are likely to impose new pottery styles on local populations.<sup>29</sup> Isserlin's article, showing that archaeological evidence for military invasions may not be as forthcoming as archaeologists would like, should warn those who give nonevidence the same weight as actual material evidence found. Dismissing a literary reference to a city's destruction simply because evidence of a destruction is not found in archaeological excavations may be a hastily drawn conclusion. Such a warning, however, runs counter to Albright's theorem of using archaeology to check literary statements.<sup>30</sup> For him, archaeology had the last word of reality because he saw archaeology as neutral. Isserlin's article suggests that the findings of archaeology are not unbiased. They may be biased by the expectations of the archaeological community, whether or not these expectations are based on substance. They may be additionally biased by the inherent limitations of archaeology.

The biblical text is not the only ancient Near Eastern historical record that has problems reconciling its stories with the archaeological record. The record of Thutmose III's first military campaign against Canaan is the most complete military account of any Egyptian pharaoh.<sup>31</sup> According to the account, the Egyptians and a coalition of Canaanite resisters met in a great battle on the plain near Megiddo. In the end, the rebel army fled to the safety of Megiddo.<sup>32</sup> Because the defensive features of Megiddo were strong, Thutmose III was forced to construct a counter wall built of timbers.<sup>33</sup> It is likely that this wall was made of local fruit trees and was of significant size, since it was said to be a "thick wall" and even given a name.<sup>34</sup> Megiddo's city wall is also mentioned in the account. Yet archaeological work has found no evidence of Megiddo's Late-Bronze-Age wall or Thutmose's wall. In fact, it has found no evidence of any Late-Bronze-Age fortifications at

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>30</sup>W. F. Albright, "The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archaeology," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 74 (1939): 13.

<sup>31</sup>James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (London: Histories and Mysteries of Man, 1988), 2:391.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 430.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 433.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Megiddo, leaving archaeologists to ponder the “odd” anomaly and to question the Egyptian story.<sup>35</sup>

Another example in which textual evidence has not been supported by archaeological excavations comes from Carchemish. According to the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses III, the Sea Peoples destroyed Carchemish, yet no archaeological evidence has been found to substantiate that claim.<sup>36</sup> Additional examples could be given in which missing archaeological evidence provides no visible confirmation for literary evidence.<sup>37</sup>

A similar problem, even closer to Israelite settlement issues, is encountered in the search for the new population groups introduced by the Assyrians to Israel after the conquest of that land (Ezra 4:1-2). No such new groups have been identified by archaeology.

According to biblical and Assyrian sources, thousands of deportees of various origins (Arameans, Babylonians, Iranians, Arabs, Elamites) were exiled to the country at that time. But these ethnic groups, which settled in various parts of the country, are not reflected in the material culture of the period.<sup>38</sup>

An example of a people who left little archaeological evidence is the Assyrian merchants who lived in Cappadocia in the nineteenth and early eighteenth centuries B.C. They lived in Anatolian houses, used local pottery, and adopted other elements of the local material culture. It is only from the information provided in tablets and seals that their long presence in Anatolia can be clearly detected.<sup>39</sup>

We may conclude that when it comes to the origins or migrations of peoples during the late second millennium B.C., there is no certainty that written sources can be reliably verified by archaeology. Material culture may indicate their presence, but no negative conclusions can be

<sup>35</sup>R. Gonen, “Urban Canaan in the Late Bronze Period,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 253 (1984): 213, 219.

<sup>36</sup>Hans G. Guterbock, “Survival of the Hittite Dynasty,” in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C. from Beyond the Danube to the Tigris*, ed. William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowsky (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), 55.

<sup>37</sup>For example, Michael G. Hasel writes about Dibon, “This gap in occupation presents a challenge to the records of Ramses II.” About Akko, he notes, “Excavations have not uncovered an LB gate and there is no evidence for fortifications,” which counters the Ramses II account that includes a picture of the defeated city “with its gates askew” (*Domination & Resistance: Egyptian Military Activity in the Southern Levant, 1300-185 BC* [Boston: Brill, 1998], 164, 169).

<sup>38</sup>Gabriel Barkay, “The Iron Age II-III,” in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 55. The biblical account is supported by Sargon’s claim that he resettled Samaria with new inhabitants (*Daniel David Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* [London: Histories and Mysteries of Man, 1989] 2:17, 55).

<sup>39</sup>Barkay, 243.

drawn from the lack of positive evidence.<sup>40</sup>

In 1968, S. Horn began excavations at Tell Hesban. Although I believe that archaeologically he was well ahead of his time, reading his reports makes it clear that among the other goals of the project was the discovery of Heshbon, the city of Sihon the Amorite (Num 21). The name of the project "The Heshbon Expedition" and the interchangeability of the names Hesban and Heshbon in his report testify to that aim.<sup>41</sup>

After five seasons, no evidence of Late-Bronze-Age materials was found at Tell Hesban. As the later project director Lawrence Geraty wrote, "The only substantive non-correlating data appear to be the biblical allusions to the date, nature, and location of Sihon's Amorite capital, and the archaeological evidence that human occupation at Tell Hesban did not antedate ca. 1200 B.C."<sup>42</sup> The unusual turn in Geraty's article was his willingness to probe a broad-ranging list of options as to what the nonevidence of Tell Hesban means. He listed eight possible explanations, finally admitting that he was not satisfied with any of them.<sup>43</sup>

His suggestions make it apparent that critical schools of thought favor one option; traditional or conservative schools of thought favor others, and so on. What Geraty has tried to do is to introduce the reader to the spectrum of possibilities. The primary weakness of archaeology is not so much the skill of the archaeologist or the limited exposure of the tell. It is the inability of nonevidence to give any direction. Archaeology stops with what an archaeologist finds. Beyond that lies speculation.

In the current archaeological paradigm, the Bible and all written records are on trial subject to disproving, not only by evidence but also by nonevidence. Such a methodology is untenable since, as noted above,

<sup>40</sup>Nadav Na'aman, "The Conquest of Canaan in the Book of Joshua and in History," in *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel*, ed. Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994), 242, 243.

<sup>41</sup>R. S. Boraas and S. H. Horn, "The First Campaign at Tell Hesban," *AUSS* 7 (1969): 97, 99.

<sup>42</sup>Lawrence T. Geraty, "Heshbon: The First Casualty in the Israelite Quest for the Kingdom of God," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A.R.W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 242.

<sup>43</sup>One of those possibilities, of course, is that the biblical account is false (i.e., not historical), which many biblical historians have assumed. While that is a possibility, it cannot be assumed because of the lack of evidence. Real, self-existing evidence must be found to disprove literary evidence. Only then can literary evidence be considered unreliable. After all, literary evidence is evidence. It has an existence. Theories, however, like the documentary hypothesis, are nonevidence because they are constructs of theoreticians. The disagreements of proponents of the documentary hypothesis, in every new book supporting the theory, demonstrate this.

archaeological data are incomplete, collected in various uncontrolled environments, and subject to accidental and unusual finds, or nonfinds.

Unlike “found,” “tangible” evidence, nonevidence does not originate from an archaeological site but, rather, from theories created by archaeologists. According to Brandfon, archaeologists assume that what they are doing is objective science, when in fact their interpretations of the archaeological data are not any more factual than are the interpretations of written history. The very act of developing “typologies” (used by Brandfon to mean the descriptive process) moves the architecture and objects found by archaeologists into the realm of theory.<sup>44</sup> When nonevidence is used as data and is assumed within a theory, it becomes destructive because theorists are then obligated to fight for the validity of the nonevidence as though it had an existence. For this reason new ideas or alternate suggestions for interpreting the archaeological and biblical data may be ignored or dismissed out of hand.

It is more than telling that Isserlin’s article has been ignored by the archaeological community. The idea that archaeology is the verifier of ancient literary works has been accepted at face value, and evidence to the contrary is not easily accepted.

For archaeological theories to have valid bases, they must be built on evidence, not on nonevidence. Likewise, it is not logically sound to dismiss evidence, such as the biblical text or any other ancient literature, on the basis of nonevidence. Written documents and existing data must be used together. Neither of these may be invalidated by nonevidence—arguments from silence. The archaeological community needs to rethink the relationship of archaeological evidence to ancient literary works, in order to develop reliable parameters within which these two categories of evidence can be related.

<sup>44</sup>Fredric Brandfon, “The Limits of Evidence: Archaeology and Objectivity,” *MAARAV: A Journal for the Study of the Northwest Semitic Languages and Literatures* 4 (1987): 17.