

News and Current Events :: Israel digging for Biblical validation of territorial claims...**Israel digging for Biblical validation of territorial claims... - posted by ccchhrrriiss (), on: 2010/3/24 12:13****Researchers dig up controversy in Jerusalem**

by Erika Solomon
Reuters
24 March 2010

JERUSALEM (Reuters) — Archaeologists in Jerusalem are competing to unearth artifacts pointing to the ancient city's Jewish past, which are used to justify Israel's claim to all of it as the indivisible capital of the modern Jewish state.

But critics say some of "finds" are really just bending science to prove a "Biblical heritage" that is open to dispute.

"Archaeologists have given up many of their best practices in order to answer the continuing demands of mainly political actors," says Raphael Greenberg, an Israeli archaeologist from Tel Aviv University, who has worked in Jerusalem.

With generous funding, including from religious groups intent on expanding Jewish settlement, archaeologists are digging up possible Biblical sites in occupied East Jerusalem and its surrounding West Bank suburbs at record pace.

So fast, say critics, that there are cave-ins at some sites, heightening tensions with the 250,000 Palestinians who live in the holy city, which Israel has controlled fully since 1967.

Archaeology in Jerusalem dates back well over a century -- British enthusiasts began digging below the Old City 150 years ago, revealing remains that many say are those of a walled settlement ruled by the biblical Jewish king David.

That City of David site, still an active dig, is now also a tourist attraction, with around 400,000 visitors a year. It is funded by Elad, a group which also supports Jewish settlement.

As visitors eye the cracked stone walls, a stout 60-year-old man dons a skullcap, stops the group and flips open a Bible.

"This is where archaeologists found a clay seal with the name Gedaliah Ben Paschur, mentioned in verse 38:1 in the Book of Jeremiah," whispers the volunteer, who gives his as Mordechai. "I can't tell you what to think. But what else could this place be, if not the ancient Biblical city?"

QUEST FOR ROOTS

Greenberg is not persuaded by fixation on the holy book.

"Archaeology cannot prove or disprove the Bible," he says "A name that matches that of a person in the Bible can only be taken so far -- it's just a name."

He says some archaeologists cater to financial donors like Elad, which seeks to establish Biblical roots and develop tourism, thereby strengthening Jewish claims on the area.

"Over time, when you're funded by these people in huge sums, and we're talking millions of dollars, you become part of the machine," argued Greenberg, who has been speaking out for some time over his doubts about archaeology in the holy city.

Jerusalem archaeologists feel pressured on all sides.

"I'm being looked at by religious extremists on all sides, the municipality, and the Antiquities Authority. Everybody is pushing his side," says Ronny Reich, an archaeologist from the University of Haifa in northern Israel.

Walking atop the massive stone steps of the Silwan Pool -- or the Pool of Siloam -- which he excavated in 2004, Reich dodges crowds of tourists. According to scripture, Jesus healed a blind man here.

Reich insists that his Elad funders do not influence him and he is "not in accordance" with everything Elad does. He says

his work is unfairly attacked: The critics "can't fight Elad in court, so they use my dig," he said, to attack it by proxy.

BIBLE AS TOOL

Bringing an outsider's eye to the arguments, British writer Simon Goldhill, in his 2008 book "Jerusalem: City of Longing," speaks of the thrill of the digs that are rewriting text books, almost by the year, but also of the bitter, personal arguments:

"The vitriolic dispute over the status of the Bible for archaeology is a classic Jerusalem row," the Cambridge professor writes, "touched as it is with so many personal issues within the small community of professional archaeologists, and laced as it is with the political charge of early history in this country."

Critics like Hani Nur al-Din from the Palestinian Al Quds University in Jerusalem accuses some Holy Land archaeologists of caring more about publicity than scholarly peer review.

He names Eilat Mazar, of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who drew attention last month after excavating a wall she says was built by the biblical King Solomon in the 10th century BC.

"She doesn't give any archaeological context to her findings other than dating pottery shards," Nur al-Din charged. "The Bible should be put aside. It's not a history book."

But Mazar, scion of an illustrious Israeli archaeology dynasty, disputes that: "Excavating Jerusalem without knowing the Bible is impossible," she says. She said she would write a scientific report of her find following laboratory study.

Pointing out the freshly excavated wall, Mazar says the Bible offers a "core of reality": "We've got a fantastic 10th century fortification line that indicates a central, powerful regime," she said. "The Bible tells us there was such a king at this time, and his name was Solomon. Why ignore it?"

"The question is if we can trace that core and prove it existed. Well, here it is."

Greenberg complains that the focus on the specific histories of the peoples on the land around Jerusalem can obscure the fact that finds here can have greater importance than proving, or disproving, the ancestral ties of one group or another.

"Israeli archaeology has a lot to contribute to very basic history about the development of the earliest human civilizations," he said. "If all we deal with is who were the Jews or the Palestinians, then this remains a very anachronistic and parochial archaeology with little to say to the world."

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