

## More Material Hermeneutics

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### Abstract

This essay explores the types of knowledge which may be produced by 'letting the things speak'. Natural science instruments have begun to provide many different kinds of information not previously available; for example, dating techniques, usually through multiple processes, can produce more accurate dating than ever before. My aim is to apply such processes to social science and humanities issues with the hope that a material hermeneutics can produce new and different knowledge. I examine one case study, which inverts the traditional way of dating and relating Biblical texts to archeology. The inversion is one in which archeology sheds light upon the construction of the texts. The results are quite radical and the conclusion is that the narratives of the texts, highly questionable from archeological results, are what produce the 'people' rather than the other way around.

### Introduction

Those who are familiar with my work know that one of my recent projects has been to see how far *hermeneutic practices* penetrate into the natural sciences. A preliminary report and program appear in *Expanding Hermeneutics: Visualism in Science* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998). This essay, however, reverses many of the lessons I have learned about a 'visual hermeneutics' such as the natural sciences have developed. My question is: what if one were to take what one has learned about natural science analytic and instrumental practices and *turn them back upon the social and human sciences*? My answer is framed in what I shall call a *material hermeneutics*, which is a technique whereby things—materialities—are given a voice.

Here I will follow only one example arising from what some people now refer to as the 'minimalists' in archeology. The area of the earth that has been most intensively explored by archeology is that region the West calls 'the Holy Lands'—today's Israel and the surrounding lands of Egypt,

Assyria and the Middle East. One can say that the traditional way in which archeology took shape in this area was to move from *text to artifact*. There are countless such examples: if the Bible refers to the walls of Jericho; the task becomes one of finding Jericho. If the Bible refers to the Temple; the question becomes one of where and how old was this Temple, etc.

In the middle of the 20th century, however, archeologists sometimes inverted this text-to-artifact direction and instead began to ask, what do the artifacts say about the construction of the Bible? It is from this process, well described in a recent book, *The Bible Unearthed*, that I shall take my clues. Contemporary archeology is much more sophisticated than traditional archeology and has so many more instruments and tools with which to work.

Dominant in much of our imagination are our Biblical—and Greek origins. And that, in part, is because these 'histories' have become so because of work from 19th century investigations. These brought us both a higher criticism of the Bible and a romanticism about the Greeks, both largely due to efforts of German thinkers and archeologists.

Cities cited in the Bible are presumed to have existed in biblical times and are searched for and excavated when found. This textual clue for material history is not different in principle from the way in which the largely German discoverers and extollers of ancient Greece also did their work in the 19th century—Schliemann on Troy, for example. This text-to-archeology model prevailed in many areas even until the 1990s. A new approach is proposed in a recent book, *The Bible Unearthed*, from which I draw some lessons for this version of expanding a material hermeneutics.

The authors, Finkelstein and Silberman, propose an inversion of the traditional process: what does archeology show us by way of clues for the formation of the Bible itself? Such an inversion I take to be basically phenomenological, as one would with figure/ground reversals to reveal different aspects of things. Moreover, one should note at this preliminary juncture, that there is probably no region of the earth so fully archeologically examined as the Holy Lands, and this more fully and with more contemporary means since 1970 than in any other locality.

The Finkelstein and Silberman results are radical and controversial, and I want to quite deliberately outline some of these as starkly as possible:

- Abraham and the Patriarchs are, at best, legendary or mythical;
- The Exodus, in all likelihood, did not happen and Moses is as legendary as Abraham;
- Israel, as a distinguishable group was simply a Canaanite variant subgroup and pre-existed the Exodus;
- There never was a glorious Solomonic Empire;
- The earliest strands of the Bible go no farther back than the 7th century BCE, but narrate events claimed to occur centuries, even millennia earlier.

These radical conclusions are largely deconstructive in form, but the Finkelstein-Silberman conclusions also have positive, reconstructive claims:

- For the most part the Bible was formed after the Assyrian conquests destroyed and captured the North and is largely an invention of the southern Judean kingdom;
- The Bible reflects a tension between a more puritanical and religious South and a more assimilationist North;
- The biblical narrative recites origin and golden age stories typical of rhetorical assertions of religious primacy;
- The Bible ‘invents’ a people, not the other way around.

I shall return to these results shortly, but one can see here a case, which fits nicely the questions and interests of ‘science studies’ as well. For example the results obviously relate to contemporary interests, politics and cultures. One can immediately see the implications for Israeli politics and claims about the promised lands—but, as we shall see, the results actually cut two ways.

My question, however, remains that of a material and textual hermeneutics and what, in this trajectory, the inversion and effective making primary of archeological or material hermeneutics by Finkelstein

and Silberman implies. But, I also do not wish to oversimplify this contrastive tension since, from my own background on the textual side, what at first may appear as radical in *The Bible Unearthed*, is not quite as radical as it might be. Indeed, one question I had in mind when I first read the book was, what new could I learn from it? I will make a very brief detour into some earlier results of the largely textual hermeneutics of higher criticism whose roots lie in 19th and early 20th century biblical scholarship:

- Earlier textual analysis, some going back as far as the 17th century, had noted curious and often contradictory ‘doublers’ in the Torah. For example, double flood, double creation stories, double genealogies, all with contradictory orders. By the 19th century and what is now known as the higher criticism the notion that the Torah was actually a complex, edited and redacted body of texts was commonplace. The now famous ‘J’ or Yahwist and ‘E’ Elohist sources identified two contradictory origins accounts, with tensions between Babylonian-like sequences related to the Gilgamesh epics on the one hand, and a desert, patriarchal or nomadic source on the other. Moreover, the Babylonian Genesis sources thus already hint at a later period of composition. In short, the claim that much of the Torah took its shape in the 7th century BCE could be made on textual and comparative grounds. So, the time of the compilation of biblical texts into the Torah was not new to me.
- Literary forms are also revealing. There are vast stylistic differences between the stories of the Patriarchs with their legendary ages, flood tales, and the like, and the legalistic and historicized accounts of kings and dynasties, which presumably occur much later. Given the vast time spans between presumed events and redacted texts, this was not surprising either.
- And the laws of the Deuteronomy text, discovered 622 BCE, were already recognized as probably historically earlier than the later redacted foundational stories of Genesis and Exodus. Thus, again, there is a textual and stylistic difference between significant parts of the Torah already recognized by textual hermeneutics. Thus, if one is a deep higher critic, even though limited to more or less textual and comparative cultural

analysis, and the older archeology, many of the conclusions reached by Finkelstein and Silberman do not seem as radical as may appear at first sight. What, then, does the newer archeology add, and how does the material hermeneutics involved play itself out?

*The Bible Unearthed* is an archeological *tour de force* with many details, so I will here highlight only a very few salient examples, emphasizing where possible the contributions of newer techniques for material hermeneutics. Finkelstein and Silberman give 1970 as a date for what I am calling the new archeology, i.e. after the 1967 War, which opened up the land of ancient Israel to new work and after the inventions and practices that have widened archeological investigation to the new sciences. These include (a) important new dating techniques, such as re-calibrated radiocarbon dating, (b) regional survey techniques, (c) the addition of data from associated animal bones, seeds, soil analysis and anthropological models drawn from more sophisticated comparative world cultures, all of which expanded and greatly enriched older techniques (Finkelstein & Silberman 2001, 21).

I shall now return to some of the claims I listed from Finkelstein and Silberman, drawing where possible from the contributions of the new material techniques to emphasize what may be newly learned from such material hermeneutics:

- The Patriarchs. According to biblical dates, 2005 is the 5766th year since the Creation, and even given the long lives of the ancients, including Methuselah, Abraham presumably leaves Mesopotamia for Canaan around 2100 BCE. He is depicted as something like a Bedouin nomad, with camels, goats and family, and fathers the first heritage for life in Canaan. But, while even until the late 20th century, this picture of nomadic culture was taken for granted and was assumed to have reached back the four millennia implied, the new archeology, now armed with surveys which include animal bones and patterns, today shows that *camels were not domesticated until late in the 2nd millennium BCE and did not, in fact, become part of nomad life until about 1000 BCE, a full millennium after Abraham*. The Joseph story, only one generation past Abraham, speaks of camels carrying ‘gum, balm, and myrrh’, a practice which

is established by the 7th/8th century BCE but not in the period over a millennium earlier claimed for the Abrahamic story. In short and anticipating another conclusion, the descriptive account of 7th century BCE practices accords well with the newly theorized time of biblical redaction and construction, but not with the presumed events disputed by archeology. The Bible is simply describing what was occurring at the time of its own writing, while retroprojecting these events into an earlier millennium (Finkelstein & Silberman 2001, 37).

- The non-occurrence of the Exodus argued for by Finkelstein and Silberman is bound to be more controversial, and I shall not dwell longer on this than other less controversial items—but it is interesting to note that a good many American Reform rabbis have publically accepted the Finkelstein-Silberman views. Again, dating using the Hebrew Bible would place the Exodus at about 1440 BCE, but even the place names and Pharaohs mentioned do not fit this date. Rather, the city being built by the Hebrew slaves was named after Ramesses in 1320 BCE. This story becomes very, very complicated and I do not have time to trace its intricacies here—but I will point out that my authors document two interesting points very well: first, during this period Egypt thoroughly controls Canaan and this is also a period with massive record keeping and massive communication between Egypt and the Canaanite territories and there is simply no mention of a mass exodus of Semites from Egypt, biblically estimated at nearly half a million people. Finkelstein and Silberman also point out that had this many or even a much smaller number of people wandered the Sinai peninsula for 40 years, there would doubtless be campsites to be discovered, but even in spite of the micro-archeological techniques already well employed, there is no evidence at all for such wanderings.
- I shall not detail greatly the equally large and complex work done in *The Bible Unearthed* regarding the period of the conquest, equally under doubt, other than to indicate that through contemporary dating methods, it now becomes possible to generalize that many of the cities presumed to have been conquered by Joshua simply did not exist at the presumed time of the conquest, but did exist by the 7th century BCE when it is assumed the Torah was redacted and written.

- If the exodus and the conquest are to be placed in the legendary category, along with the Patriarchs, what to me is much more interesting—and here I learned something new—is the claim made that there is strong evidence that Israel pre-existed the Exodus and that the Israelites were, in fact, a sub-group of Canaanites themselves! The first textual, archeological evidence is the Merneptah stele, which cites the name Israel within Canaan in 1207 BCE, a reference to indigenous people already long known. Then, in a long chapter on Israel, my authors describe the thorough archeology, which showed that as Canaanite culture declined, various sub-groups formed, including some in the highlands of the north. Again, cutting to the quick, these Israelites remained Canaanite in some degree, since bronze bull figurines and other Canaanite deities are found with the sites, but they were also distinctive in that, unlike other groups of the time, *no pig bones were found in the Israelite sites so identified*. Thus, one cultural distinction may have been a prohibition against pork, a practice that possibly preceded a much later codification in law. Finally, there is no evidence that this sub-group of Canaanites migrated from anywhere else, thus again evidencing the indigenous relationship with the larger, extant culture. It may be added here that the biblical accounts of its kings, constantly returning to the Baals is even more evidence that Canaanite culture continued throughout and may indirectly show that these kings are simply local Canaanite variants.
- The most publicized and perhaps the most controversial claim made by my authors regards the non-existence of a glorious Solomonic Empire. David, at least as a regional southern king, was well documented extra-biblically, but the very lack of Solomonic golden age work was archeologically curious. The detractors who have succeeded in getting publicity for presumed Solomonic sites, however they cannot show anything which has the grandiosity of sites for those claims even today. There is no evidence for anything remotely approaching Persepolis or the Parthenon anywhere in ancient Israel.

But I stray from my point, which is to show how a textual hermeneutics relates to an expanded material hermeneutics. In this trajectory I have emphasized contradictory tensions between textual and material evidences.

In this case these very contradictions lead to some interesting theories concerning both the relations between textual and material hermeneutics, and to possible reconstructions of the older fashioned textual hermeneutics.

For example, in this case the theory holds that the Torah, now as evidenced by rather massive, but new material evidence from archeology and anthropology, was likely largely constructed in the 7th century BCE and thereafter. When this is presumed, then its descriptions much more closely match the 'history' of its time of composition than previously would have been thought. A southern kingdom, rigorously religious and legalistic, fearful of its larger neighbors, reflecting the various cultures extant including our camel nomads, emerges as the then contemporary scene within which the narratives are spun. This artwork has its parallels in the late medieval schools of painting in which the characters of biblical stories are depicted wearing medieval garb and wandering amidst gothic architecture while adoring the holy infant whose birth would have occurred, in historical terms, over a millennium earlier.

As I leave this trajectory, I will make one passing comment about a provocation I threw out in the beginning. *The Bible Unearthed*, I suggested, is bound to be controversial in a contemporary world, one which includes on the part of the Diaspora returnees to today's Israel who claim that the promised land was given them by God when they undertook a conquest which attempted, but did not succeed in throwing out the previous inhabitants, the Canaanites. The new view derived from *The Bible Unearthed* very interestingly shows that if the Israelites were, all along, part of Canaan, as but one sub-group, a clan as it were, amongst the Canaanites, then the entire picture changes. This possible claim, I believe, is not weaker than a return promise one, but it is a claim which reflects much better the current realities of today's conflict perhaps not that different from the ancient ones.

## Epilogue

I have now taken you through a trajectory in which an expanded hermeneutics, marked by material practices, takes its place. In the inversion of the biblical account, the entirety of the textual dimension undergoes a radical

re-situating and re-framing, which implies in certain ways that a material hermeneutics may take precedence.

And, while my point is simply to exemplify the need to expand our notions of hermeneutics to include scientific processes such as those instanced in my examples under material hermeneutics, there is also an intriguing future possibility. What if one were to apply an expanded hermeneutics to the humanities, or to philosophy itself? While the path I have followed here has been one which incorporates a material hermeneutics into primarily ancient and even pre-historic examples, there is no reason in principle that the same could not be done with more modern and even contemporary phenomena.

I did not specifically make reference to the point that the rise of science studies, or as I prefer, technoscience studies in the 20th and now 21st centuries is, in effect, the opening to material hermeneutics. If one looks at several of the landmark studies which have transformed our views of how the natural sciences are formed—for example, Shapin and Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Airpump*, or Peter Galison's *Image and Logic*, or even better his work on how clocks and railway schedules in the patent office played a role in Einstein's special relativity, or Andrew Pickering's notion of *The Mangle of Practice*—one can begin to see how detailed attention to the material realm and to the instrumentation which reveals it has changed our very notions of natural science. It has been this movement which today makes the older, theory-biased positivistic notions of science seem so antiquated. What would happen if we turn the aim of such sensitivities to humanities and philosophy?

And, if one were to do so, where would one look for such an application? There are two initially obvious places for such research to begin: first, with respect to the history of philosophy, such an examination of philosophy's material culture has rarely been done. I, myself, have done some work in this area. For example, in recent years I have shown how specific technologies—such as the *camera obscura*—have played roles in how philosophers came to think of knowledge production itself. This was the case with both Descartes and Locke in the 17th century. And, secondly, one could examine how the tools, the material means by which philosophers work, relate to their own production of knowledge. Is the philosophy produced

through word processing, the internet and contemporary technologies different from that produced by typewriters or earlier methods—and if so, how? The role for a material hermeneutics is just beginning.

## Reference

- Finkelstein, Israel and Neil Asher Silberman (2001), *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*, New York: The Free Press.