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Mazar's Modified Chronology: The Preservation of Solomonic **Possibilities**

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Since the enlightenment, a dichotomy has formed in biblical scholarship between those who believe there is evidence to support the biblical narrative, and those who feel there isn't. With the birth of the historical-critical approach, Bible critics began to challenge the historicity of well-loved biblical stories, such as Joshua's conquest, or Joseph in Egypt. Fearing the Bible was losing its historical legitimacy, believing scholars set out to dig, in hopes that they would uncover evidence of the Bible's historicity in the face of developing critical scholarship. Tel-Megiddo, as will be the focus of this essay, was a site which quickly became crucial to the discussion. Solomon's powerful building expansion, as described in 1 Kings, provides an excellent architectural framework for archaeologists to dig for. Particularly 1 Kings 9:15, which makes the specific claim: "And this is the reason of the levy which king Solomon raised; for to build the house of the Lord, and his own house, and Millo, and the wall of Jerusalem, and Hazor, and Megiddo, and Gezer" (KJV). This verse promises, if the text is historically accurate, the existence of Solomonic walls at these sites. Megiddo became the first focus of efforts to locate such walls.

The University of Chicago Oriental Institute was the first to dig at Megiddo and undertook two original excavations: one from 1925–34,¹ and the second from 1935–39.² With much excitement, they uncovered gates and walls which they assigned to Solomon. Yigael Yadin with Hebrew University subsequently undertook digs and studies of his own which seemed to strongly support the original conclusions of the University of Chicago. He quickly became the face of the traditional camp of scholarship, and the main proponent for the gates at Megiddo (and Hazor and Gezer) being "Solomonic." However, the conclusions of the University of Chicago and the findings of Yadin would be challenged in the coming decades by scholars such as David Ussishkin and Israel Finkelstein, who claim that through technology and modern theories, they have, "pulled the carpet from under the biblical image of a great Solomonic United Monarchy."³

So, where does this leave us today? Has the passing of nearly a century proved the conclusions of these pioneering scholars misguided, or hastily deduced? While that is the argument of many, I will argue that even in the face of new technology and theories, the University of Chicago's conclusions are still tenable; it is particularly the Modified Chronology of Amihai Mazar that has preserved this possibility, even amidst the advancing of minimalist scholarship.⁴

Initial findings and Yadin's case

It is first important to realize the staggering significance of the work accomplished by Chicago and Yadin. Chicago's findings, published as *Megiddo I* in 1939 and *Megiddo II* in 1942, had tremendous implications for biblical scholarship. In strata IV, which they dated to be from 1000–800 BCE,⁵ they uncovered a palace and courtyard with a gate and enclosure wall around the outside. The gate had six chambers and seemed to connect to a strong wall of insets and

¹ Robert Lamon and Geoffrey M. Shipton, *Megiddo I: Seasons of 1925-34 Strata I-V, OIP 42*, eds. John Albert Wilson and Thomas George Allen (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1939).

² Gordon Loud, Megiddo II: Seasons of 1935-39, OIP 62 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

³ Israel Finkelstein, "A Low Chronology Update," in *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science*, eds. Thomas Levy, Thomas Higham (New York: Routledge, 2014), 31–42.

⁴ Amihai Mazar, "The Debate over the Chronology of the Iron Age in the Southern Levant," in *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science*, eds. Thomas Levy and Thomas Higham (New York: Routledge, 2014), 15–30.

⁵ Lamon and Shipton, *Megiddo I*, 8.

offsets, which they dubbed Wall 325.⁶ With great excitement, they dated the gate with Wall 325 to the time of Solomon, claiming the "Phoenician" style masonry fit the biblical descriptions of the "Solomonic building enterprises."⁷

While their conclusion was rather undeveloped and relied heavily on the biblical text, Yadin went to work to develop it further, looking additionally to both Hazor and Gezer. He undertook excavations at Hazor in the early fifties, looking for similar structures that were found by Chicago at Megiddo.⁸ He was successful in this, and there they uncovered a six-chambered gate connected to a casemate wall that surrounded the city, which Yadin declared to be "identical" to the Solomonic gate uncovered at Megiddo.⁹ These findings, Yadin continued, "not only confirm[ed] quite clearly the biblical narrative (1 Kings 9:15) . . . but even suggests that both gates [Megiddo and Hazor] were built by the same royal architect."¹⁰ Satisfied with this outcome, he then turned to Gezer, reasoning it would probably have the same structure as Hazor and Megiddo, just as stated in 1 Kings. For his research, he utilized the excavation in Gezer carried out by R. Stewart Macalister a half decade earlier and asserted that the structure which Macalister referred to as the "Maccabean Castle,"¹¹ was actually, "nothing less than a Solomonic city wall and gate."¹² At this point, Yadin was certain the same city gate structure was found at all three sites the Bible mentions as locations where Solomon built walls.

Yadin faced an issue, however, as the masonry of the wall at Megiddo seemed to be different than the walls at Hazor, and Gezer. Wall 325, the wall of insets and offsets at Megiddo, seemed to be newer than the other walls, as it employed a newer style and technology, as well as nicer ashlar masonry. Scholars such as J.W. Crowfoot interpreted these differences to support an alternative dating of the gates to the period of the Omrides, a century after Solomon.¹³ Yadin, however, hypothesized that while wall 325 must be newer, it was built over top of an old casemate wall that was like the walls located at Hazor and Gezer. He figured that Wall 325 was connected to a newer four-chambered gate which was built over top of the six chambered gate, and the casemate wall below was connected to the six-chambered "Solomonic" gate. In 1960 he carried out a short dig at Megiddo to test his theory and revealed that there indeed was a casemate wall buried beneath the wall of insets and offsets (Wall 325), and that the stronger wall connected to the four-chambered gate.¹⁴ In figure one below, this casemate wall is visibly buried beneath wall 325 right above the stables. These latter structures were the work "of a later sovereign, most probably King Ahab."¹⁵ This was a clear paradigm for the existence of Solomon and his building projects. Yadin's work surprised many, and even scholars that were normally at odds with him, like Yohanan Aharoni for example, accepted his dating of the gates.¹⁶ While the subsequent decades would bring new technology, and very real challenges, it will be clear that Mazar's modified Chronology preserves this "Solomonic" paradigm.

⁶ Lamon and Shipton, *Megiddo I*, 9.

⁷ Loud, *Megiddo II*, 42.

⁸ Yigael Yadin, "Excavations at Hazor," *IEJ* 19, no. 1 (1947): 1–11.

⁹ Yigael Yadin, "Excavations at Hazor, 1957: Preliminary Communiqué," *IEJ* 9, no. 1 (1958): 3.

¹⁰ Yadin, "Excavations: Communiqué," 3.

¹¹ R. Stewart Macalister, "Fourth Quarterly Report of the Excavation of Gezer," PEQ 35, no. 3 (1903): 195–231.

¹² Yigael Yadin, "Solomon's City Wall and Gate at Gezer," IEJ 8, no. 2, (1958): 80-86.

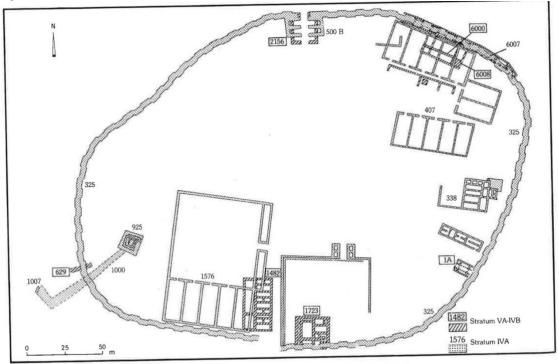
¹³ J.W Crowfoot, "Megiddo—A Review," PEQ 72, no. 4 (1940): 132–147.

¹⁴ Yigael Yadin, "New Light on Solomon's Megiddo," BA 23, no. 2 (1960): 62-68.

¹⁵ Yadin, "New Light," 68.

¹⁶ Yohanan Aharoni, "The Stratification of Israelite Megiddo," JNES 31, no. 4 (1972): 302–311.





Megiddo: plan of the city and main buildings in strata VA-IVB and IVA.

Ussishkin, Finkelstein, and the Low Chronology

While Yadin's proposals were universally accepted at first, subsequent decades brought a more enlivened discussion. In 1980, David Ussishkin published a direct challenge to the work of Yadin, claiming it was based too heavily on "biblical interpretation and typological comparisons."¹⁷ He argued that the similarities between the gates at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer are not enough to suggest the same architect nor a same period, as there were similar structures found at Lachish and Ashdod. To Ussishkin, this was clearly a common gate structure in that period throughout the whole Near East.¹⁸ So, in rejecting typological comparisons as relevant, Ussishkin claimed the internal evidence suggested that Wall 325 indeed did connect to the six-chambered "Solomonic" gate, and therefore dated to the period of the Omrides in the ninth century BCE. While his conclusion was weakly reasoned (and rejected by many), he did shed light on the weakness of typological comparison. In order to hold water, Yadin's work would need to be substantiated with a further anchor.

In 1996, Israel Finkelstein built upon the work of Ussishkin, and proposed a radical shift in the chronology for the Iron Age Levant.¹⁹ Calling the work of Yadin a classic case of "circular

¹⁷ David Ussishkin, "Was the "Solomonic" City Gate at Megiddo Built by King Solomon?" *BASOR* 239, no. 1 (1980): 3.

¹⁸ Ussishkin, "Was the 'Solomonic' City Gate?" 17.

¹⁹ Israel Finkelstein, "The Archaeology of the United Monarchy: An Alternative View," *Levant* 28, (1996): 177–187.

reasoning and dead reckoning,"²⁰ he wanted to discuss the search for the United Monarchy without "conventional wisdom, text bias, or irrelevant sentimentality."²¹ It seems however, he replaced this "irrelevant sentimentality" with an agenda of his own. Conventional scholarship at this point recognized Stratum VA-IVB at Megiddo, Stratum X at Hazor, Stratum VIII at Gezer, and Stratum V at Beer-sheba as the period of the administrative United Monarchy. Finkelstein, building on the axiom that philistine pottery and the mention of Arad in the Sheshonq list were the only real anchors to the dating of the Iron Age, changed the entire paradigm. His main assertion was that Philistine bichrome pottery, conventionally dated to the eleventh century BCE, should in actuality be dated 75–100 years later. This would shift the dating of the entire Iron Age Levant forward a century, moving the strata listed above to the time of Omri, and completely ruling out the existence of a united Davidic Monarchy.

At the time of its publishing, Finkelstein's iconoclastic Low Chronology (hereafter LC) was mainly ignored and deemed as radical and unfounded. However, it gained steam in 1997 with the publishing of Ussishkin's dig in the Jezreel Valley.²² This location is significant, as it is universally agreed upon as the second residence of the Omride dynasty, and was destroyed in the mid-ninth century, meaning, the pottery of this location can safely be dated to that same time period.²³ Accessing the data from this dig, Orna Zimhoni found many similarities between the pottery found by Ussishkin at Jezreel, and the pottery of Strata IVB of Megiddo.²⁴ Finkelstein used these similarities to justify specifically his low dating of Migiddo's Strata IVB, as it suggested that the Omrides, who were responsible for the settlement at Jezreel, were also responsible for the building of Strata IVB's six-chambered gate at Megiddo. Mazar points out, however, that Zimhoni also located similar pottery in the construction fills below the royal enclosure of Jezreel, which were probably debris from an earlier 10th century city. This keeps the door open to dating Strata IVB anywhere from the 10th to the 9th century BCE.²⁵

All of this is what Lester Grabbe describes as an "only partially controlled chaos."²⁶ Finkelstein's LC seeks to make sense of certain difficulties present in the traditional chronology, such as a lack of synchronization with the chronology of the neighboring lands, or the seeming lack of archaeological evidence in Jerusalem for the existence of a Davidic monarchy of substantial proportions. He feels that by shifting the dating, the timeline of the southern Levant will offer a "more credible pace of development" in the Aegean,²⁷ and that the enigma of the United Monarchy can be explained away as the invention of later Judahite literary technicians.²⁸ It has come to be espoused by multiple scholars, such as Ayelet Gilboa and Ilan Sharon,²⁹ or

²⁰ Finkelstein, "An Alternative View," 178.

²¹ Finkelstein, "An Alternative View," 178.

²² David Ussishkin and John Woodhead, "Excavations at Tel Jezreel 1994–1996: Third Preliminary Report," *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 24, no. 1 (1997): 6–72.

²³ Mazar, "The Debate Over the Chronology," 19.

²⁴ Orna Zimhoni, "Clues from the Enclosure-fills: Pre-Omride Settlement at Tel Jezreel," *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 24, no. 1 (1997): 83–109.

²⁵ Mazar, "The Debate Over the Chronology," 19.

²⁶ Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London: Clark Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 11.

²⁷ Finkelstein, "A Low Chronology Update," 36.

²⁸ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel* and the Origin of Sacred Texts (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 46.

²⁹ Ayelet Gilboa and Ilan Sharon, "Early Iron Age radiometric dates from Tel Dor: preliminary implications for Phoenicia and beyond," *Radiocarbon* 43, no. 3 (2001): 1343–1351.

Ze'ev Herzog and Lily Singer-Avitz³⁰ in their timelines and reconstructions, and has had a major impact on the faith of believers across the world. In this context, it may seem to some that the conclusions of Yadin and the University of Chicago were primitive, and do not hold up under scrutiny of modern methods and technology. It may even suggest that these early scholars were dishonest or biased in their conclusions. However, Amihai Mazar with Hebrew University has invented what he calls the "Modified Conventional Chronology" (MCC), which not only provides a paradigm in which the University of Chicago and Yadin's conclusions are still tenable, but also exposes issues of ambiguity which suggest the debate is far from over.³¹

Mazar's Modified Chronology

Mazar's Modified Conventional Chronology (hereafter MCC) essentially accepts Aharoni and Amiran's scheme from 1958 but with modifications.³² He recognizes the long duration of the Iron IIA pottery period and suggests that the boundary between Iron I and Iron II be placed in the first quarter of the tenth century BCE, perhaps 980 BCE. He then suggests that the end of the Iron IIA period should be 150 years later, after the end of the Omride Dynasty and the destruction of Jezreel, ca. 840/830 BCE. According to Mazar, this scheme enables "the definition of three major pottery periods in the 450 years between ca. 1150 and 700 BCE: Iron IB, Iron IIA, and Iron IIB, each with regional variations and each lasting about 150 years."³³ In other words, he contrasts the traditional view by suggesting that the Iron IIA period should last from 1000/980–840/830 BCE, a much longer period than was previously thought. Mazar believes that C-14 dating, and the results of the Tel Rehov excavations, support this lengthened Iron IIA period,³⁴ and that the Iron IIA can be divided into an "early and late phase."³⁵

Thus, during the first half of the tenth century BCE a change happened in the material culture throughout the country. This change consisted of "new modes of pottery production, settlement patterns, architecture, and religious art."³⁶ While the MCC places these changes at the beginning of the tenth century BCE, the LC places this change at the start of Iron IIB and the period of the Omrides. This is substantial, as post-change Philistine pottery was dug up in Strata IVB at Megiddo, the same layer as the "Solomonic" six-chambered gate.³⁷ While the LC closes the door completely to the existence of a Davidic Monarchy by claiming the pottery at the relative layers reveal ca. ninth century BCE, the MCC preserves latitude in making a conclusion, as the pottery was in use during both the "Solomonic" period, and the subsequent century of the Omrides.

³⁰ Ze'ev Herzog and Lily Singer-Avitz, "Redefining the centre: the emergence of state in Judah," *Tel Aviv* 31, no. 2 (2004): 209–244.

³¹ Amihai Mazar, "The Iron Age Chronology Debate: Is the Gap Narrowing? Another Viewpoint," *NEA* 74, no. 2 (2011): 105–11.

³² Yohanan Aharoni and Ruth Amiran, "A new scheme for the sub-division of the Iron Age in Palestine," *IEJ* 8, no. 3 (1958): 171–184.

³³ Mazar, "The Debate Over the Chronology," 21.

³⁴ Elisabetta Boaretto et al, "Dating the Iron Age I/II transition in Israel: first intercomparison results," *Radiocarbon* 47, no. 1 (2005): 39–55.

³⁵ Mazar, "Is the Gap Narrowing?" 107.

³⁶ Mazar, "The Debate Over the Chronology," 21.

³⁷ Israel Finkelstein et al., "New evidence on the Late Bronze/Iron I transition at Megiddo: implications for the end of the Egyptian rule and the appearance of Philistine pottery," *Egypt and the Levant* 27 (2017): 261–280.

Mazar's MCC exposes many issues in the LC that should impede its veracity. For one, he points out the hypocrisy in the long-standing criticism with the conclusions of Yadin and likeminded scholars; it is assumed by some that they were simplistic and even naive in their reading of the biblical text and biased in their interpretation of material from the ground. However, Mazar pointedly states:

> In other words, it seems to me that the same charges used against conservative traditional biblical archaeologists can be made against a broad spectrum of minimalists, revisionists, post-modernists, or whatever term we use for a variety of current writers. All too often, archaeological issues are mistreated by scholars of all various schools of thought when it is used for historical interpretation.

His point is, while many believe archaeology to be an objective, sophisticated source for interpretation, it too is highly imbued with methodological problems and unsolvable ambiguities. Indeed, both minimalists and traditionalists bring bias to their interpretation of material from the ground, and it is unfair to view the work of the original excavators and the conclusions of Yadin to be subordinate to modern scholars—whose agendas simply desire different things.

The strength of the MCC, and the reason why it is suggested as the current solution to the dating of the Iron Age Levant, is its presentation and humble approach to ambiguities. While the LC makes sense of some issues that the MCC does not, it also takes a stance that is very problematic in many cases. For example, Mazar observes that the LC insists a time span of 300 years for the hill country "settlement" material culture assemblage at sights like Giloh, Ai, and Shiloh.³⁸ This is "unfeasible" considering its thin accumulation between stratigraphy and the short life of each settlement.³⁹ As a result, it compacts the emergence of the complex Israelite settlement, and the dense stratigraphic development at sites like Tel Rahov and Hazor into a mere 70 years.⁴⁰ This blatant ignoring of some areas of stratigraphic evidence in order to explain others is what Mazar calls "premature and unacceptable."⁴¹ In contrast, Mazar's MCC is verified by the stratigraphy at Hazor and Tel Rehov,⁴² and retains the possibility of Solomon being the builder of the six-chambered gate at Megiddo. While it leaves much ambiguity for separating the tenth century from the ninth century BCE, it is the strongest template with which further research can build upon in building a reliable chronology of the Iron Age.

Conclusion

The strength of Mazar's chronology lies in its careful consideration of both camps of biblical scholarship. In the face of such polarity, a bridge was needed to reconcile the schism between traditional and minimalist scholarship. His perspective brings to light the bias which is unavoidable regardless of what narrative is followed. While Yadin subscribed to the traditional biblical narrative, Finkelstein follows a different story, one which is no less arbitrary and difficult to prove. The clear conclusion from this survey and development, is that the University of Chicago's original assertion-that the United Monarchy is responsible for the chambered

³⁸ Mazar, "The Debate Over the Chronology," 25.

 ³⁹ Mazar, "The Debate Over the Chronology," 25.
⁴⁰ Finkelstein, "A Low Chronology Update," 37.

⁴¹ Amihai Mazar, "Iron Age Chronology: A Reply to I. Finkelstein," Levant 29, no. 1 (1997): 165.

⁴² Amihai Mazar, "Greek and Levantine Iron Age chronology: a rejoinder," *IEJ* 54, no. 1 (2004): 24–36.

gates at Megiddo—remains possible even after a near century of dialogue and further research. Solomon very well could've built those walls and gates. And now, with much more being known about the possibilities for presence and control of ancient dynasties, Mazar's Chronology has left the conclusion to be made by those who have gained further information. As Knoppers expressed, "The only present certainty is that the age of consensus is past."⁴³ As students and scholars of the biblical world, we must avoid the handcuffs of certainty, and maintain a boundary that such ambiguities call for.

⁴³ Gary N. Knoppers, "The Vanishing Solomon: The Disappearance of the United Monarchy from Recent Histories of Ancient Israel," *JBL* 116, no. 1 (1997): 19–44.

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