

## The bible: truth or legend, fact or fantasy?

Irving M. Spitz\*

*Institute of Hormone Research, Shaare Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel*

This paper is part of a lecture I delivered at the symposium banquet in September 1999 during the meeting Progesterone, Progestins and Antiprogestins in the Next Millennium. The participants, from many continents and of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, were all prominent biologists or clinicians accustomed to rigid scientific methodology. Since the symposium was held in Jerusalem where many of the most prominent events of the Bible were played out, I decided to pose the question as to whether there was any scientific evidence to corroborate any of the biblical narratives. This short essay is by no means intended to be a learned discourse. Rather it is the attempt of an amateur in the field to provide a welcome diversion after the reader has spent lengthy hours perusing the scientific articles in this symposium book. For further details, more scholarly reviews can be consulted.

The Bible is probably the most important collection of writings in the whole world literature. As the source of two great religions, Judaism and Christianity, it has provided spiritual guidance for a large part of the human race in the past and continues to do so in the present. From the earliest time, the stories in the Bible have captivated the imagination of young and old alike. Its psychological insights and moral appeal are profound.

The Hebrew Bible (so-called Old Testament) has three main sections. The Torah or the five books of Moses is the most sacred part of the Jewish Scriptures. The second comprises the Prophets, and the final section the Writings. Orthodox Jews maintain that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. Modern scholars maintain that the main elements of the Torah were written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE by different hands and woven into a single text only some 200 years later.

Major archeological excavations in the Holy Land commenced in the 1920's under William F. Albright, generally considered the founder of biblical archeology. Albright and his successors believed that archeology was the best sci-

tific method to substantiate the veracity of the Bible. However, over the last few decades, a group of scholars have suggested that larger-than-life biblical figures reported in the Bible, such as King David and his son Solomon and their mighty kingdom, may not have existed. At best, David and Solomon were small tribal chieftains, and their kingdom was a very small enclave. These scholars, the biblical minimalists, base their conclusions on the paucity of archeological material for that period (1000 BCE to 900 BCE) that has been uncovered [1,2]. In fact the only extra-biblical mention of King David discovered to date (Fig. 1) is a reference to the 'King of Israel' and 'The House of David,' from a stone stela inscription uncovered in Tel Dan in 1993 [3].

After the death of Solomon in 922 BCE, his realm disintegrated and was divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. From this period on, there exist both archeological and written records, in the form of stone commemorative monuments (stelae or obelisks), which substantiate the biblical narrative. One famous example is the 'Black Obelisk' which depicts the biblical King Jehu kneeling before the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (Fig. 2). Erected in Nimrud in Assyria about 841 BCE, the cuneiform caption reads 'Tribute of Jehu, son of Omri.' Jehu and Omri were kings of the Northern Kingdom. The House of Omri is also mentioned in a stone tablet uncovered in Jordan in 1868, the Mesha Stele, currently in the Louvre, dated to approximately 850 BCE.

I have selected some episodes in the Bible that pertain to Jerusalem and the rule of Hezekiah, king of Judah, to prove how the biblical events can be unequivocally substantiated in a rational and objective manner. Hezekiah was king from 727 to 698 BCE. In 721 BCE the Kingdom of Israel was annihilated by the Assyrians, their powerful neighbor. Hezekiah thus came to the throne at a critical time. With the Assyrian destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, a very large number of refugees flooded south into Jerusalem. As a consequence, the city had to expand to absorb a rapidly expanding population. Luckily for Judah, Hezekiah, the man of the hour, was at hand; this Churchill of his day succeeded in rallying his distraught people and saving his capital city.

\* Tel.: +972-2-6555188; fax: +972-2-6522018.  
E-mail address: spitz@popcbr.rockefeller.edu (I.M. Spitz).



Fig. 1. House of David Inscription, Tel Dan, Northern Israel (9<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). The large fragment on the right was found in Tel Dan by Avraham Biran in 1993. He subsequently uncovered the two additional fragments. According to most scholars, the 'King of Israel' and 'The House of David' is inscribed on the stela in paleo-Hebrew script of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. This was the form of writing used before the Babylonian Destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

Gloom and pessimism must have pervaded Jerusalem at the time, the local population having just seen the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel. They knew that it would not be long before the menacing Assyrian hordes would be at the gates of Jerusalem. "Hezekiah set captains of war over the people and gathered them together to him in the street—and spoke comfortably to them saying: Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria nor for all the multitude that is with him, for there be more with us than with him. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah" (11 Chronicles, XXXII, 6–8).



Fig. 2. Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, Nimrud, Assyria (about 841 BCE). The four-sided black Obelisk is decorated with 5 rows of relief sculptures depicting the bringing of tribute to the Assyrian King. A relief in the second row depicts the biblical King Jehu (841–814 BCE) kneeling before the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. The cuneiform caption reads 'Tribute of Jehu, son of Omri.' This is the only likeness of a biblical king which exists.

Hezekiah set about strengthening Jerusalem as a vital part of the preparations against the inevitable attack by the Assyrians (Fig. 3). The Bible states that Hezekiah built up all the wall that was broken, and raised it up to the towers and repaired the city of David (11 Chronicles, XXXII, 5). Substantial remains of fortification walls that have been dated to the period of Hezekiah have been discovered in the present Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. One section, known as the Broad Wall, is seven meters wide and was part of the wall built by Hezekiah to withstand the Assyrian battering rams (Fig. 4). There is evidence that in some places the wall had been built over remains of earlier houses. The great Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, a contemporary of Hezekiah, also alludes to this. "And ye have numbered the houses of Jerusalem and the houses have ye broken down to fortify the walls (Isaiah, XXII, 10).

Another important part of Hezekiah's preparations for the coming war was his reorganization of the city's water supply. Ancient Jerusalem possessed only one natural fresh-water spring, the Gihon, which was outside the city walls and consequently could not be easily defended.<sup>1</sup> The Bible states that Hezekiah took counsel with his princes and his mighty men to stop the water of the fountains which were outside the city and they helped him (11 Chronicles XXXII, 3). The Bible goes on to relate that Hezekiah

<sup>1</sup> Recent excavations by Reich and Shukron in the city of David have cast doubt on the well-established dogma that the Gihon spring was outside the original city walls. According to their recent excavations, a city wall has been found that did enclose the Gihon spring [4].

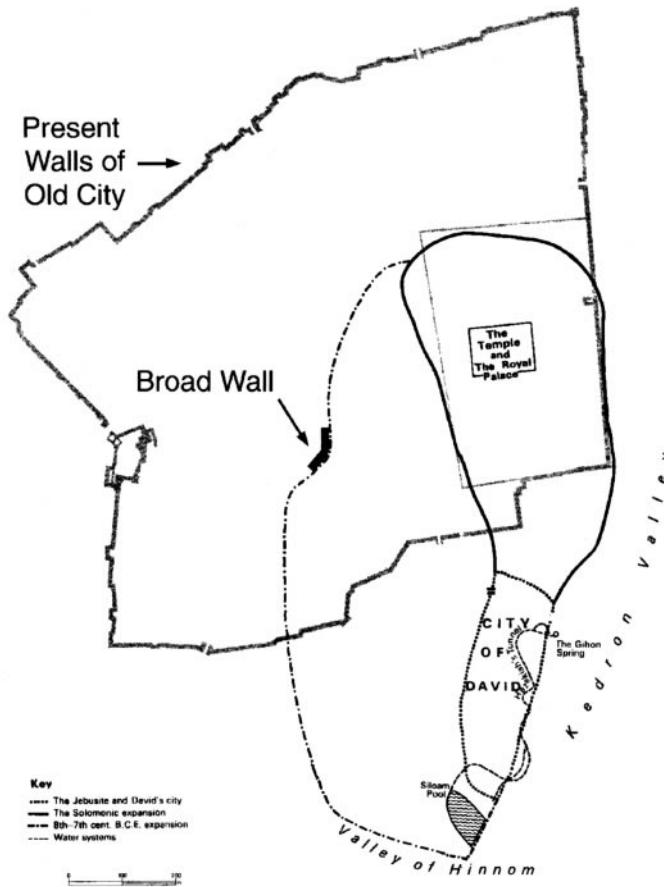


Fig. 3. Jerusalem at the time of King Hezekiah (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). The original Jebusite and Davidic city was outside the present Old City walls. This was dictated by the local topography, the Kedron valley to the east, and the valley of Hinnom to the south and west. During the reign of King Solomon, the city expanded northward where the Temple and Royal Palace were built. During the reign of Hezekiah, the city expanded westward to accommodate the refugees who fled the destruction of the Northern Israel Kingdom in 721 BCE. The location of part of the defensive wall built during this expansion, the Broad Wall (Fig. 4) is indicated in this map. Note the Gihon spring and man-made Hezekiah Tunnel that exits in the Siloam pool. Tunneling commenced by one group at the Gihon spring and the other at the Siloam pool. Despite the serpentine route of the tunnel, the workers met.

closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed the water down to the west side of the city of David (11 Chronicles XXXII, 30).

The tunnel that Hezekiah quarried out over 2700 years ago is still in existence today and bears his name (Fig. 5). It traces a serpentine route and is 1750 feet long. Cut through rock, this was an awesome undertaking. Tunneling commenced at both ends, the aim being to join up. This was without question a remarkable engineering feat, considering that these ancient people possessed no sophisticated implements and had to cut through solid rock with simple iron tools and nothing to guide them<sup>2</sup>. Yet the two teams did meet, and an inscription was put up to celebrate their remarkable achievement (Fig. 6). Written in the Hebrew script

of the time, the inscription states: "This is the story of the cutting. While the stone cutters were swinging their axes, each man toward his fellow, and while 3 cubits remained to be hewn, there was heard a man's voice calling to his fellow, for there was a split in the rock. And at the end of the tunneling the hewers hacked each man towards his fellow, axe upon axe. And the waters flowed from the spring toward the reservoir for 1200 cubits. The height of the rock above the head(s) of the hewers was 100 cubits."

Now that the waters of the Gihon had been diverted to a new reservoir inside the city wall at the south end of the town, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were assured of a secure and safe water supply in the event of a siege. This is an extraordinary example, dovetailing events related in the Bible with the actual archeological water tunnel in Jerusalem and a written inscription dated to the period of Hezekiah.

The Assyrian king against whom all these preparations were made was Sennacherib (704–681 BCE). At the head of a large army, he launched campaigns against the cities of

<sup>2</sup> This theory has recently been challenged. Studies conducted by Gill concluded that the Hezekiah tunnel is part of a well developed karst system comprising a network of natural dissolution channels and shafts in the limestone and dolomite underlying the city. According to this theory, the tunneling was not done through primary planning but rather by utilization and adaptation of these preexisting natural features [5].



Fig. 4. Broad Wall (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). This seven meter wide wall was discovered in 1969 in the present Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem by the Late Nahman Avigad. It was built over remains of earlier houses. Photograph by IMS.

Judah, first laying siege to Lachish, which guarded the capital's southern approach, capturing it with ease. The bible relates how "in the 14th year of King Hezekiah did Sennacherib king of Assyria come up against all the fenced cities of Judah and took them (Isaiah XXXV1, 1; 11 Kings XV11, 13; 11 Chronicles XXX11, 1).

The siege of Lachish is another uniquely well-documented episode of biblical history. We have the Biblical and Assyrian accounts as well as an extraordinary pictorial record, in the famous series of bas-reliefs from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh. Finally there are the archeological excavations at Lachish that substantiate the story. During the reign of Hezekiah, Lachish was a large, fortified city, bounded by formidable walls and battlements. Excavations conducted by David Ussishkin have uncovered the remains of the attackers' siege ramp—the only ancient Assyrian siege ramp yet to be discovered. They also found evidence for a Judean counter-ramp, erected within the city in haste and probably under fire, to give the defenders the advantage of height. Despite the spirited defense, they were unable to

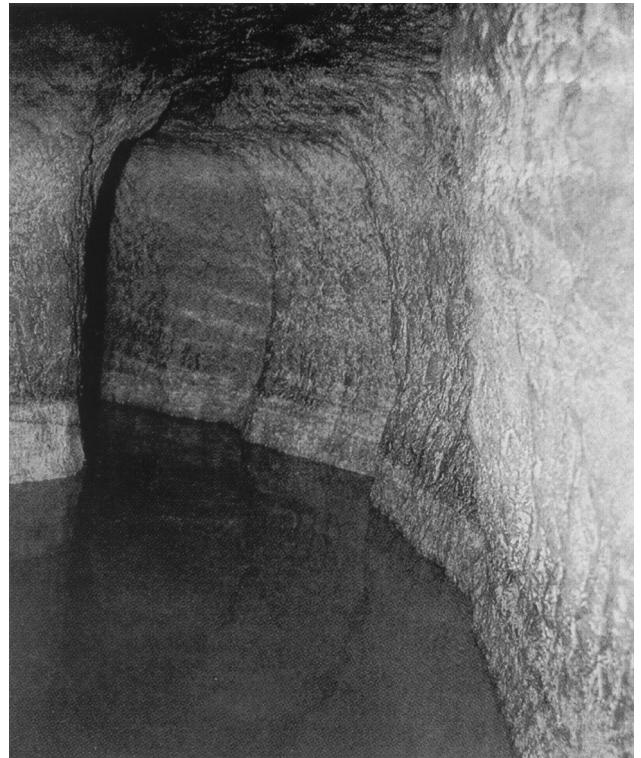


Fig. 5. Hezekiah Tunnel (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). Part of the 1750 foot long water tunnel built by King Hezekiah to safeguard the city's water supply. Constructed 2700 years ago, water still flows through the tunnel. Despite several curves in the tunnel (one is depicted above) the two teams working from each end met up (Modified from Shanks [7]).

protect the walls against the onslaught of the Assyrian battering rams. At the point where the walls were breached, the excavators found hundreds of iron and bone arrowheads and many ball-shaped sling stones.

In Nineveh, his capital city, Sennacherib had his artists cover one of the walls of his palace with reliefs of his capture of Lachish (Fig. 7). These reliefs document the Assyrian assault on the city, from the initial march to the city, the breaching of the city walls by battering rams and



Fig. 6. Siloam Inscription (8<sup>th</sup> Century, BCE). The inscription written in Hebrew contemporary with Hezekiah describes the moment of meeting in the hewing of Hezekiah's tunnel (see text for details). The inscription was inscribed on the face of the rock wall near the exit on a specially prepared surface. It was discovered in 1880 whilst the country was under Ottoman rule and is currently in the Archeological Museum, Istanbul, Turkey.

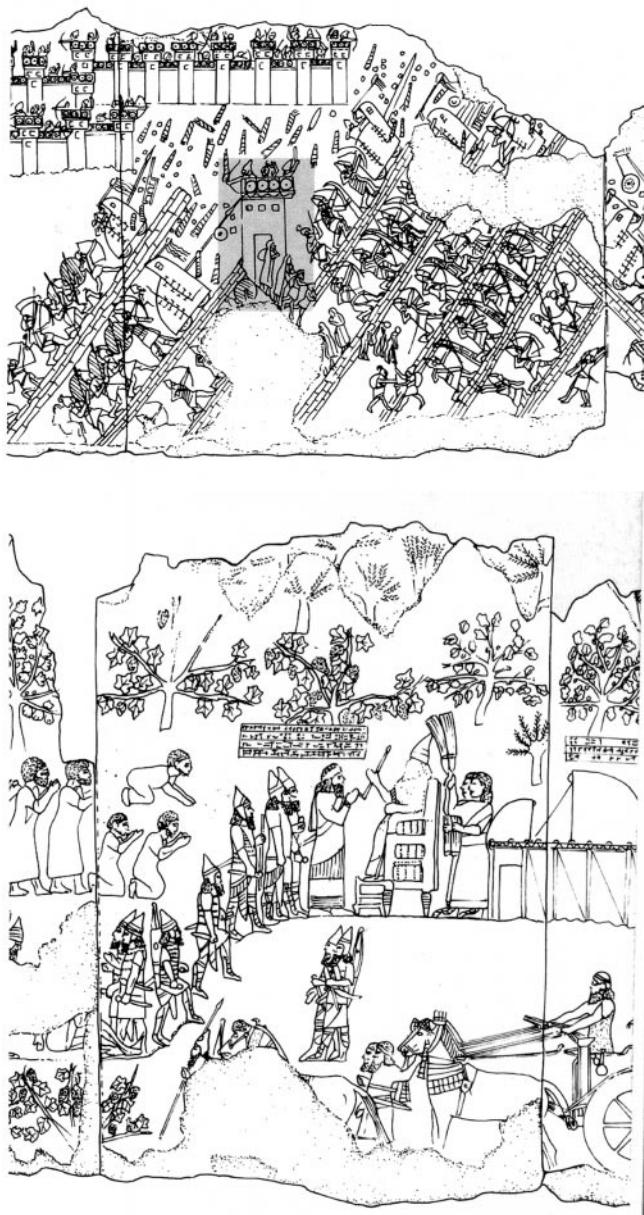


Fig. 7. Lachish Reliefs (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). Fig. 7A depicts the Assyrian troops advancing from the left. The city is attacked with wheeled battering rams. To the right the defeated inhabitants are led out by Assyrian troops. Fig. 7B depicts Sennacherib sitting on a throne viewing the aftermath of the siege and receiving reports from his officers as well as the capitulation of the city. Near his head is an inscription describing him as 'sitting on his throne while the spoil of the city of Lachish passes before him.' These reliefs were discovered in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh by Sir Austen Henry Layard in 1850. He also uncovered the Black Obelisk (Fig. 1) in Nimrud in 1846. Both are now housed in the British Museum in London. Layard's fieldwork came to an end with the outbreak of the Crimean war in 1852.

siege engines, and the capture and subsequent torture of the hapless citizens. Sennacherib is depicted sitting on a throne viewing the aftermath of the siege and receiving reports from his officers.

From his base camp at Lachish, Sennacherib dispatched



Fig. 8. Sennacherib Prism, pottery, Nineveh Assyria (691 BCE). This cuneiform inscription, written in Akkadian, describes the military campaigns of Sennacherib in Judah and Philistia. This prism on display in the Israel museum in Jerusalem is one of three complete prisms found to date. A second is in the British Museum in London and a third in the Oriental Institute in Chicago.

part of his army under his chief officers to Jerusalem. But the city did not fall, a point on which both Biblical and Assyrian sources agree. This is furthermore confirmed by archaeological evidence. The Bible states the following: "Thus saith the Lord concerning the King of Assyria. He shall not come into the city [= Jerusalem], nor shoot an arrow there nor come before it with shield. By the way that he [Sennacherib] came, by the same shall he return and shall not come into the city, saith the Lord. For I will defend the city to save it for my own sake. And it came to pass that night that the angel of the Lord went out and smote in the camp of the Assyrians 185,000 people. So Sennacherib, King of Assyria, departed and went and returned and dwelt in Nineveh. And it came to pass when he was worshiping in the house of prayer that his sons smote him with the sword (11 Kings XIX, 32–37)." The book of Chronicles puts it



Fig. 9. Hezekiah Seal, private collection (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). Seal measuring 0.4 inches in diameter and 0.08 inches in thickness. It is inscribed: Belonging to Hezekiah, [son of] Ahaz, king of Judah. The script on the bulla is also similar to the inscription of the Hezekiah tunnel (Fig. 6). The seal depicts a two-winged beetle (scarab) pushing a circular ball of dung. This might appear inappropriate by today's standards, but was popular in those times and represents the rising sun [8].

even more dramatically. "So he Sennacherib returned with shame of face to his own land . . . And the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib, the king of Assyria (11 Chronicles XXXII, 21, 22)." Contemporary Assyrian records indicate that Sennacherib was indeed assassinated by his sons.

A prism (Fig. 8), known as Sennacherib's prism and inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform script, gives the most complete extra-biblical Assyrian account of Sennacherib's military campaign against Judah and Hezekiah, including the sacking of Lachish and other towns. It confirms much of what is written in the Bible. It also makes no claim that Jerusalem was conquered. "And Hezekiah, king of Judah, who did not submit to my yoke, I (Sennacherib) laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity . . . I besieged them and conquered them. I made him a prisoner, like a bird in a cage." Sennacherib also details the booty taken from these towns and claims that more than 200,000 prisoners fell into his hand.

The reasons why the Assyrians never succeeded in capturing Jerusalem are unknown; they are probably related to a combination of factors, including the new system of de-

fenses around Jerusalem and the heavy tribute paid by Hezekiah (protection money). "And the king of Assyria appointed unto Hezekiah king of Judah 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold. And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house" (11 Kings XVII, 14,15). It is remarkable that Sennacherib's annals also report the tribute of 30 talents of gold but claim that 800 talents of silver were paid [6].

One final vignette. A clay impression of the seal of King Hezekiah has recently come to light (Fig. 9). It is inscribed: "Belonging to Hezekiah [son of] Ahaz, king of Judah" [7]. It depicts a two-winged beetle (scarab). Thus we have today in our possession an original impression of the personal seal belonging to one of the greatest biblical Kings, a relic that is 2700 years old!

For the time being, the threat of conquest was averted. It was the Babylonians, and not the Assyrians, who finally conquered Judah, destroying Jerusalem and its Temple and driving the people into distant exile.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that the Bible is not intended to be a precise, accurate historical document; conversely, the aim of archeology in Israel is not to prove or disprove the authenticity of the Bible. The most important lesson of the Bible is that it constitutes the basis of a written code of laws spelling out the relationship of man to his fellow man, man to the state and man to God. What is important is not its historical veracity but the profound moral lessons that it teaches us all. Compiled thousands of years ago in a tiny land, the Bible has not only survived the ages, but has been and continues to be a major force in Western Civilization.

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