

Digging biblical history, or the end of the world

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At the Megiddo Dig: The Assyrian palace of Stratum III. Credit: AFTAU

Some come to dig the Tel Aviv University-directed archeological site at Tel Megiddo because they are enchanted by ancient stories of King Solomon. Others come because they believe in a New Testament prophecy that the mound of dirt will be the location of a future Judgment Day apocalyptic battle. Hence the second, rather more chilling name for the site: "Armageddon."

Tel Megiddo has been the subject of a number of decisive battles in ancient times (among the Egyptian, Hebrew and Assyrian peoples) and today it holds a venerated place in archaeology, explains site co-director and world-renowned archeologist Prof. Israel Finkelstein.

Says Prof. Finkelstein, from the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures at Tel Aviv University, "Megiddo is one of the most interesting sites in the world for the excavation of biblical remains. Now volunteers and students from around the world can participate in the dig which lets them uncover 3,000 years worth of history -- from the late 4th millennium B.C.E. to the middle of the first millennium C.E."

Prof. Finkelstein, who belongs to the Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, has been co-directing the site with Prof. David Ussishkin, also of Tel Aviv University, since 1994.

Prof. Finkelstein has co-authored a best-selling book on archaeology and biblical history (*The Bible Unearthed*, 2001). Earlier this month he released a book (written with A. Mazar) that contains surprising commentary on biblical archaeology and history, *The Quest for Biblical Archeology*, published by the Society of Biblical Literature in the United States. He is also the recipient of the prestigious international Dan David Prize in the category of Past Dimension (2005).

Likened to a "lightning rod" by the journal *Science* (2007), Prof. Finkelstein is famous for his unconventional way of interpreting biblical history: he puts emphasis on the days of the biblical authors in the 7th century B.C.E. and theorizes that ancient rulers such as David and Solomon, who lived centuries earlier, were "tribal chieftains ruling from a small hill town, with a modest palace and royal shrine."

Yet, "new archaeological discoveries should not erode one's sense of tradition and identity," he states.

Prof. Ze'ev Herzog, who heads the archaeology institute at Tel Aviv University, says, "There has been an important revolution in biblical history in the last decades. We are now uncovering the difference

between myth and history, and between reality and ideology of the ancient authors. This is the role of our generation of archaeologists -- to unearth the real historical reality to find out why and how the biblical records were written."

The archeologists aren't the only ones looking for answers. More than one hundred volunteers come from all corners of the world to dig Megiddo alongside Prof. Finkelstein every year. They are teachers, journalists, actors, construction workers, professors and housewives, as well as archaeology, history and divinity students who dig for credit.

The Megiddo dig is offered as a three-week, four-week or seven-week program. As part of the experience, volunteers live in a nearby kibbutz and are exposed to lectures and debates about their findings. The dig is partnered with the George Washington University, represented by Prof. Eric Cline, the American associate director of the dig. This makes it an ideal stomping ground for Americans who want a hands-on education in archaeology.

"Team and staff members come from all around the world for many reasons: the adventure of foreign travel in a safe yet educational environment, intellectual stimulation, and -- yes -- even a love of digging in the dirt," notes Prof. Finkelstein.

And those with no prior knowledge or degrees are welcome, he stresses. "We cater to all of the volunteers' backgrounds and teach them field methods, archeological techniques as well as the history of biblical archeology. It is truly a wonderful experience."

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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