

I will be dealing with two questions in this weekly Readers' Mailbag. The first has to do with the historical evidence, if any, for the Israelite kings Saul, David, and Solomon - did they exist, or are the stories about them entirely legendary? The second, coming to us from a different universe, is about me personally, and my faith, whether there was a proverbial straw that broke my faith-camel's back.

QUESTION:

According to Finkelstein and Silberman's book, The Bible Unearthed, which I know you admire, there is zero evidence for the existence of Solomon and not much more for David and Saul (Shlomo Sands takes a similar view). Your position seems to be that all three existed: can you please tell me why you think this?

RESPONSE:

First let me say that I think Finkelstein and Silberman's book is absolutely terrific. I often get asked what book I would recommend to people who are interested in the critical study of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) comparable to the kind of thing I do for the New Testament, and along with Richard Friedman's book, Who Wrote the Bible, I always recommend The Bible Unearthed. It is written by two highly established and incredibly learned scholars who seem to know everything relevant to the Hebrew Bible, and it presents views that are very different from what people with only a passing familiarity with the Bible would think. Really great, in every way.

Finkelstein and Silberman are far more qualified than I to say *anything* about the history of ancient Israel. And as it turns out, I am not *very* different from them when it comes to the existence of the Israelite kings Saul, David, and Solomon. If you want to look at what non-biblical sources say about any of them (Saul as the first king of Israel after centuries of relatively independent tribes running their own affairs; David his successor, who defeated Goliath, and became the king over a vast territory; Solomon his son one of the wealthiest and wisest monarchs of ancient history), the reality is, well, none of them is actually mentioned in other sources.

But there are two provisos. The first is simply the general observation that we would not expect to find much said about them in non-Israelite sources, any more than we have extensive references to the kings of Moab or Edom in ancient sources. We simply don't have many other sources, and those that exist are not interested in talking about kings of other peoples.

But second there is at least *one* piece of external evidence that David was a king and that he established a royal dynasty in Israel. Finkelstein and Silberman know this, of course, which is why they say there is not *much* evidence of David's existence. In 1993 archaeologist in the northern part of Israel discovered fragments of an ancient stele - a stone slab on which an inscription was written - at a site called Tel Dan. The inscription on the slab was made by a king of the 9th century BCE mentioned in the Bible (1 Kings 19:15) Hazael, who had a major kingdom in what was later called Syria. On the inscription Hazael boasts of having defeated in battle two kings, Omri, the ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, and an unnamed king of Judea "of the house of David."

What this means is that there was a king David who started a monarchic dynasty in Judea sometime before the 9th century. That, of course, is exactly what the Bible says.

What do we know about this king David otherwise? Nothing really. All we have is what is in the Bible. There are very good reasons indeed for thinking that the biblical narratives about David are highly, if not completely, legendary. They were not written until 400-500 years after David would have lived. Are they of much more historical value than the legends of King Arthur? (There surely was some kind of King in England after the Romans had departed, but we don't have stories until many centuries later.) Or are there some historical materials in these stories? It can be a matter of debate.

But assuming that David was not absolutely the first king of Israel, then there would have been *someone* like a Saul before him who had made the disparate tribal groups of the region into some kind of kingdom. And since David had a dynasty (according to this inscription), then his son (in the Bible it is Solomon) would have been ruler after him. But again, my sense is that most - almost all? - the tales about these figures is the stuff of legend, not history.

QUESTION:

Did you ever have one *official* A-HA moment that can distinctly remember where you realized you were no longer a believer? If so, what was that final straw?

RESPONSE:

I would say that I had a number of A-HA moments when I realized my faith was slipping away and then virtually disappeared. I've often talked about how the problem of suffering is what eventually led to my loss of faith. What I don't think I've talked about much is a moment when I realized it all.

When I moved to Chapel Hill in 1988 I had returned to my roots and began worshiping in the local Episcopal Church, the Chapel of the Cross, a church I liked very much. I was reasonably active in the church, for example sometimes teaching adult Sunday school classes (a couple of time my friend Dale Martin and I taught them together as a tag-team). I liked the liturgy of the Episcopal church - no doubt because I was raised on it; and appreciated very much the sense of reverence it inspired in the mysteries of the divine.

But there was a moment when I realized I simply didn't belong. For several years I had been applying my own "figurative" "non-literal" "spiritual" "de-mythologized" understanding of everything that happened in church: Scripture as the Word of God, the eucharist as a commemoration of Christ's death for the sins of others, prayers of intercession, and so on. (I wasn't taking these things, or the theology behind them, literally, but was understanding them all metaphorically. But I finally came to a point where I didn't think I could do it anymore.

It had to do with the reciting of the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth...." and so on. Saying the creed I came to realize that in a literal sense I didn't believe nearly any of it: that there was a God, that he created

the world, that Christ was his Son who had come down from heaven, than he had been born of a virgin, that he had been raised from the dead, etc. The only thing about it that I really, honestly, literally agreed with was the statement that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was dead, and buried. And for some reason, at that point, I simply didn't think I belonged in church any more.

These days I'm not sure that was the necessary conclusion. I probably could have simply said that I had a different *interpretation* of what was happening in church from those who took a more literal view. But at the time, I simply felt like I was being hypocritical participating in a service of worship where I simply didn't agree on all the things that everyone else was affirming that we all agreed on, and I felt awkward and out of place. So I decided that I couldn't in good conscience participate publicly that way anymore.

I can see myself possibly changing my mind at some stage. But at the time, and still, I just don't feel quite right about participating in the worship of a God (and his Son) I really don't believe in.

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