A Dig Into Jerusalem's Past Fuels Present-Day Debates

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JERUSALEM -- Down the slope from the Old City's Dung Gate, rows of thick stone walls, shards of pottery and other remains of an expansive ancient building are being exhumed from a dusty pit.

The site is on a narrow terrace at the edge of the Kidron Valley, which sheers away from the Old City walls, in a cliffside area the Bible describes as the seat of the kings of ancient Israel.

What is taking shape in the rocky earth, marked by centuries of conquest and development, is as contested as the neighborhood of Arabs and Jews encircling the excavation. But the Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar believes the evidence she has uncovered during months of excavation and biblical comparison points to an extraordinary discovery.

She believes she has found the palace of King David, the poet-warrior who the Bible says consolidated the ancient Jewish kingdom around the 10th century B.C. and expanded its borders to encompass the Land of Israel. Others are doubtful.

"There is sometimes a reality, a very precise reality, though maybe not all true, described in the Bible," Mazar said. "This is giving the Bible's version a chance."

Mazar's find is emerging at the nexus of history, religion and politics, volatile forces that have guided building, biblical scholarship and war in this city for millennia. Even before the findings have been assembled in a scientific paper, the discovery is prompting new thinking about when Jerusalem rose to prominence, the nature of the early Jewish kingdom, and whether the Bible can be used as a reliable map to archaeological discovery.

Only a small fraction of the structure has been exposed. But it is yielding rare clues to the early development of Jerusalem, long debated within Israel's university archaeology departments.

Some archaeologists believe Jerusalem was no more than a tiny hilltop village when it served as David's capital. The discovery of a palace or other large public building from David's time would strengthen the opposing view that he and his son, Solomon, presided over a civilization grander than the collection of rural clans some historians say made up the Jewish kingdom.

Whether David was a tribal chieftain or visionary monarch matters deeply to the Jewish historical narrative -- the story of a single people, once ruled by kings, and later dispossessed of its homeland until the modern state of Israel was created nearly 2,000 years later following the horrors of the Holocaust.

Palestinian leaders, who also claim Jerusalem as their capital, dismiss the ancient story as politically useful fiction. But given the palace's location on land Israel seized in the 1967 Middle East war, its discovery could be used to bolster the Israeli claim

to the East Jerusalem neighborhood and increase Jewish settlement in the area.

The excavation, on land owned by a private organization that has been moving Jewish settlers into the Arab neighborhood, is being funded by a Jerusalem research institute that promotes policy to strengthen Israel's Jewish character and by a wealthy American Jewish investor.

Prof. Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University's Institute of Archaeology said Mazar's interpretation should be understood as the latest in a series of "messianic eruptions" designed to bolster the image of David as a ruler of an important civilization, an idea that has lost currency in recent years in part because of Finkelstein's writing against it.

"That is why you are seeing this interpretation, to counter that momentum against it," said Finkelstein, co-author of the book "The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts."

"It's an important find, and I'm not underestimating it," he said. "But from what she has found to the palace of David is a big distance."

The Bible as Record

For two centuries, historians in Germany, the United States and Israel have debated the value of the Bible as an authentic record of events. Biblical archaeology emerged as a way to explore the Old Testament through discoveries on the ground. It attracted renowned scholars and adventurers to the Holy Land, but also a number of evangelical Christians and religious Jews who appeared intent on proving the Bible true.

Those who draw on the Bible, such as Mazar, argue that it should play a central role in archaeological discovery because it is the only document from that time. But in recent decades the most accepted view has been that the Bible is more myth than history, particularly its books recounting events that happened centuries earlier, like those relating to David.

The Bible's rich account of David's life has made him one of its most identifiable figures. Slayer of Goliath, a pious and treacherous king, author of psalms, David consolidated the northern kingdom of Israel and Judah around the year 1000 B.C. into a single political state under his rule. After defeating the Jebusites, he made his capital in Jerusalem, at the time a walled settlement of about a dozen acres.

Although excavations in the West Bank have produced important finds dating to that time, Jerusalem has yielded relatively little evidence of its importance, and rapid development has overwhelmed much of the city's rich buried history.

"This place was always thought of as being a lost cause," said Amihai Mazar, a renowned Hebrew University archaeologist and Eilat's second cousin, who is working closely with her. "Now we see there is a chance for new evidence."

Eilat Mazar, 49, hails from Israel's archaeological elite. Her grandfather, Benjamin Mazar, headed excavations in the 1960s and '70s of the earthen platform Jews refer to as the Temple Mount, which they believe to be the site of the first and second Jewish temples. Muslims also hold the site sacred as the Noble Sanctuary, from which they believe Muhammad ascended to heaven.

Mazar, a widowed mother of four, is an ebullient presence in sturdy shoes and slacks, her blond, wind-blown hair falling over the tops of her gold-rim glasses as she walks the perimeter of her dig. "I excavate with the Bible in one hand," she said during a recent tour of the site, fenced off and mostly covered in preparation for the rainy season. "But I do not give up even the least bit of technical excavation or research."

Her quest began with an essay she wrote for a 1997 edition of the Biblical Archaeology Review. Mazar stated that a "careful examination of the Biblical text combined with sometimes unnoticed results of modern archaeological excavations in

Jerusalem enable us, I believe, to locate the site of King David's palace."

She essentially drew a map to the palace using the Bible and two nearby excavations carried out by the British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon and the Israeli archeologist Yigal Shilo, who was once her mentor. Digging in the 1960s, Kenyon found massive stone walls near a rough-hewn, stepped structure running up the side of the valley. On the valley floor, Kenyon uncovered Phoenician capitals -- the tops of columns -- that suggested a monumental building may have stood above.

David's palace, according to the Bible, was built by workers sent to him by the Phoenician king, Hiram of Tyre. Mazar also used passages from the Books of Samuel to trace David's steps to a site adjacent to Kenyon's excavation.

But despite her detailed pitch in a journal archaeologists say is a bridge to wealthy American Jews interested in Israel's history, no one offered to fund the idea. "The lack of interest, I think, was caught up in politics," Mazar said.

Mazar joined the Shalem Center, a research institute in Jerusalem whose policy journal promotes "Ideas for a Jewish Nation." The center is now helping fund the project, which Shalem's president, Daniel Polisar, estimates will cost $1.1 million in its first phase. The center's chairman, Roger Hertog, vice chairman of Alliance Capital Management and part owner of the New Republic and the New York Sun, pledged $500,000 of his money.

In a telephone interview, Hertog said, "These were people who had done as much work as possible without actually putting a shovel to the ground." Asked if he contributed in the hopes of enhancing the Jewish claim to East Jerusalem, Hertog said that it "was not the most significant" reason.

"All of history is used politically," Hertog said. "If something wasn't found, that would have been used. If something is found, that will be used. This is one of the most contested pieces of geography in the world, and there have always been arguments about it. Whether or not this will be used -- and I'm sure it will be -- it should also be critiqued in a meaningful way."

'A Fantastic House'

Mazar began digging in February. Within weeks, she had uncovered the remains of rooms -- including pools probably used as ritual baths -- from a Roman building dating to the time of Herod, in the 1st century B.C. Those rooms rested on bedrock in places, leaving little underneath to use in evaluating her finds.

But in other parts of the cramped site she discovered the remains of massive older walls underneath the Roman structure, running toward the rim of the Kidron Valley.

Dating the finds is always difficult. An error of even 40 years can place buildings in significantly different eras. The task is especially hard when there is no identifiable floor running between walls. Mazar has yet to find one.

A building's age is commonly fixed by what Mazar calls a "chronological sandwich," comparing material above and beneath an identifiable stratum to set the range of dates. Even without a floor, Mazar believes she has enough evidence to date the building to the 10th century B.C.

Pottery found in the one-foot layer of fill below the stone walls dates to the 12th and 11th centuries B.C. In one small room above that layer, Mazar discovered 10th-century B.C. pottery free of any material from another period. Amihai Mazar, who has excavated ancient settlements near Bethlehem, said that while scant, the sample was among the finest from that time found in Jerusalem.

"This was not just a house, but a fantastic house," Eilat Mazar said of the remains, which would have stood just outside the city walls at the time. "This would have been an intellectual step for a new king to build his palace here, a statement of his vision to expand the city."

In one room, Mazar also found a bulla, or seal, roughly dating to the 6th century B.C. It bears the words, written in ancient Hebrew, "Jehucal, son of Shelemiah, son of Shevi." The name Jehucal is found at least twice in the Book of Jeremiah. The find suggests the building was used, in one form or another, for centuries. "We're left with the assumption that this is the palace," Mazar said. "It fits so well with the history. We're not forcing it into anything."

Finkelstein, who is in charge of the excavation in northern Israel where the Bible says the battle of Armageddon took place, visited Mazar's dig a few months ago. The 56-year-old scholar, tall and voluble with a salt-and-pepper beard, has often argued with colleagues whose reliance on the Bible he finds misguided.

He believes all buildings described in the Bible were built more recently than Mazar and others believe, perhaps by a century. The interpretation would mean that Jerusalem developed into a thriving, fortified city well after David and Solomon. But Finkelstein said Mazar's find appeared to show that Jerusalem, while perhaps not important during David's time, began emerging as an important city earlier than he previously believed.

"This is the missing link we have been looking for. It represents the first step in the rise of Jerusalem to prominence in the 9th century," he said. "Why does it have to be the palace of David? Once you bring that in you sound like something of a lunatic."

Seymour Gitin, director of the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem, said it was too soon to know precisely what Mazar had found. But, he said, "if this can be proven to be 10th century, it demolishes the view of the minimalists," referring to those who dismiss the unified monarchy as a petty kingdom or even as mythical.

"This find is so unusual that to really understand it she needs to keep digging," Gitin said.

With only a tenth of the building uncovered, Mazar intends to. But there is little room to expand in this place where the Bible has brought her, surrounded by Christian, Arab and Jewish houses and the Kidron Valley falling away to the south, the direction from which David arrived from Hebron three millennia ago.