Did Ancient Israel Exist?

"Memory in Ruins" by David Hazony, for the editors, in *Azure* (Winter 2004), 22A Hatzfira St., Jerusalem, Israel.

Are the glories and tragedies of ancient Israel little more than myth? That's the thrust of a revisionist school of archaeology that has emerged in recent years. In this new archaeology, "the urge to smash myths has overtaken sound judgment," contends Hazony, a senior editor of *Azure*.

Between the 1920s and the mid-1980s, biblical archaeologists working at hundreds of sites in the Middle East lent support to the Hebrew Bible's account of a distinct Israelite people that emerged some 3,500 years ago, was enslaved in Egypt, entered Canaan, and established a unified kingdom under David and Solomon. Some of today's debunkers, such as Keith W. Whitelam, author of *The Invention of Ancient Israel* (1996), "have an overtly political agenda," notes Hazony. Whitelam argues that the traditional account is a fabrication created to justify the dispossession of the Palestinian Arabs. A more scholarly attack has been launched by a group of academics led by Israel Finkelstein, chairman of Tel Aviv University's archaeology department. Finkelstein and his allies reject any use of biblical sources to corroborate the identification of archaeological discoveries. They argue that the impressive structures unearthed throughout Israel and long believed to have been built during Solomon's reign in the 10th century B.C. were actually built a century later. Far from being the fabulous city described in the Bible, King David's Jerusalem "was no more than a poor village," Finkelstein told *The New York Times*.

The revisionist attack has won enor-

According to new archaeological scholarship, the existence of buildings such as Solomon's Temple, purportedly built during biblical times in Israel, may be as fanciful as this 16th-century artist's depiction.

mous worldwide publicity. Meanwhile, complains Hazony, leading archaeologists who uphold more conventional interpretations have handcuffed themselves. Hebrew University's Amnon Ben-Tor and Amihai Mazar have confined their responses to academic journals. And unlike their predecessors, these scholars avoid any attempt to construct a coherent history of the period, contenting themselves with "detailed compendia of archaeological finds." They shy away from research on the biblical era—not a single major biblical-era dig has been launched in Jerusalem. "For scholars like Ben-Tor," Hazony says, "the question of what archaeology may mean for the larger issue of Jewish history is a danger to the scientific standing of the discipline."

The revisionist case is "fragile," in Hazony's view, but scholars who refuse to seek out fresh evidence or to mold it into a coherent historical account will be poorly equipped to carry out the quest for truth.

Christianity Lite

"Dieting for Jesus" by Alan Wolfe, in *Prospect* (Jan. 2004), 2 Bloomsbury Pl., London WC1A 2QA, England.

With a card-carrying conservative Christian in the White House, can an American theocracy be far off? That's only a slight exaggeration of the view that seems to prevail among Europeans and not a few Americans. But it's based on a pastiche of dated stereotypes about evangelical Christians, argues Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College.

The kind of religion these critics fear—dogmatic, intolerant, and at war with modernity—doesn't survive the powerful solvent of American culture. "Because U.S. culture is individualistic, populist, entrepreneurial, and experiential, old-time religions that stand for unchanging truths, rigid dogma, and strict conceptions of sin do not have much chance."

Polarizing public figures such as Jerry Falwell don't speak for the evangelical majority, Wolfe contends. For example, opinion surveys by Christian Smith, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, show that while evangelicals still look upon America as a "Christian nation," they also almost unanimously agree that they should not try to force their views on others.

The specter of powerful religious institutions forcing their will on the nation is a far cry from the reality on the ground in Protestant America, where religion focuses on the authentic experience of individual faith rather than conformity to fixed beliefs. Pentecostals—the fastest-growing sect in American Protestantism—"value emotionality and spirit far more than creed and doctrine."

The effects can be seen in evolving conceptions of sin. In the 1920s, Pentecostals inveighed against a long list of sins, from drinking and dancing to working crossword puzzles and primping in front of the mirror. Today, Pentecostal women are flocking to a church-related group called "Women's Aglow," which touts hairdos and manicures as visible signs of a commitment to God. Patricia B. Kreml's *Slim for Him* is just one of a host of conservative Christian books that take the same approach to dieting.

As this example suggests, it's women who are driving the rise of conservative Protestant churches, and they're drawn by a particular kind of empowerment. Wolfe cites a Texas church that bars women even from teaching Sunday school but thinks nothing of women in Bible study groups who casually substitute the word *daughter* where the Bible refers to the son of God. The pastor lectures his male parishioners on the need to give sexual pleasure to their wives—men are like microwaves, he declares, while women are like Crock-Pots. Because they need to attract women, Wolfe notes, the conservative churches are surprisingly "soft" on many feminist issues, such as women working outside the home.

Some conservatives, such as Lutheran theologian Marva J. Dawn, fret that the new Protestantism's emphasis on self rather than God reflects the narcissism of the larger culture. Wolfe, however, seems to take comfort in the fact that the more Christians diet for Jesus, the less weight they will have to throw around.