



Ortiz

Wolff

In the Shadow of Solomon (and Everyone Else)

Steve Ortiz and Sam Wolff

Not only in Solomon's shadow, but also the shadow of the famous excavations of William Dever at Gezer, Ortiz and Wolff bring fresh questions to an old site.

IT WAS IN THE FIRST SEASON of our renewed excavations at Gezer—Steve was giving a tour to a group of visiting archaeologists, and we were standing at the Iron Age, six-chambered city gate—when he used the popular term “Solomonic Gate.” After the tour, Sam wondered if this term should be used. It was a good question: Were we being “scientific”? Would we be accused of digging with a trowel in one hand and a Bible in the other? More important, would we be giving the impression that we had preconceived ideas? After all, our interpretations should be scientifically based on excavation results, free from any historical or Biblical bias.

All this reminded Steve of a conversation he had with a hotel receptionist a couple of years before we set up grid stakes on site. He was looking for a place to house 75 students and staff and set up a dig house. So he was visiting hotels and kibbutzim, trying to negotiate the best price, given our budget. One option was Neve Shalom, a mixed community of Jews and Palestinians living together to demonstrate that peaceful coexistence is possible, but they were not keen on having our project on their grounds. The Israeli receptionist stated that she was against Israeli settlements in the West Bank and thus was hesitant to house a project that was going to “prove” that Israeli settlers had rights to the land. She wouldn’t believe we were not using our excavations to support any religious or political agenda; we were just seeking a place for our team

members to sleep. In the end, we stayed at Neve Shalom, spending seven wonderful seasons there. They are happy to have us as guests, and we are overjoyed being there.

While we were still considering renewing excavations at Gezer, we invited Bill Dever to join us at the site for a discussion regarding strategy. Steve was a student of Bill’s at Arizona and was part of the University of Arizona team that had excavated the site in 1990; Sam was a volunteer during the 1972–1973 Hebrew Union College (HUC) excavations. Naturally, Bill was excited, telling us where we should dig and sharing the questions that had been left unanswered by the HUC excavations. Bill is a legendary archaeologist—we respect him and his thoughts—but this was our project, and we had our own research agenda; different questions are being asked today than in the 1960s and 1970s.

Since our student days at Gezer, we have lived through the many debates of Biblical archaeology (even the debate of whether we should use the term): the American/British vs. Israeli “methods” (a moot point now since excavation standards have advanced, and each school has contributed to proper field methodology), Gezer debates (e.g., date of the outer wall) and, most recently, the debate concerning David and Solomon. We have both been senior staff members and dig directors. We have never discussed our personal political affiliations (either in American politics or Israeli politics). We have never discussed our religious backgrounds. We are friends and colleagues and know about each other’s personal lives, but we have never discussed if there are differences between how an evangelical Christian excavates versus a Jew. We set up our research design and questions based on current trends and issues in the field, not what others did before us or how much of the Biblical text is historical, though naturally this question is in the back of our minds.

Who knew that a simple excavation would come with so much baggage! Gezer is an important and influential site. The excavations are the center of many debates: Biblical archaeology, Biblical history, history of the discipline, field method and theory—even modern-day politics. Before we started excavating, we had to decide that these factors were not



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events and persons, nor does he consider them fully trustworthy. For example, he accepts the historicity of the King David, but rejects his grandeur as described in the Hebrew Bible.

His Low Chronology and critical recreation of Biblical events sound provocative for some mainstream scholars for one reason—they are revolutionary. Einstein’s theory of relativity was mindboggling and was not easily accepted either.

BAR readers deserve a more balanced approach.

ALLEN GINDLER
STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK

POTPOURRI

A Happy Camper

As a longtime **BAR** reader, I always look forward to your annual “Dig” issue. I also look forward to the annual commentary regarding your cover model(s). This year’s portrait was one of the best I can recall (January/February 2015). The young woman exudes the joy that comes from learning, practical application and following a passion. (I did wonder how she keeps her eyewear so clean, though.) Thank you!

SARA Z. ABEL
PORTLAND, OREGON

Don’t Cancel

I write to you not to say “cancel my subscription” but rather to deplore what seems to be a notable absence of such letters in **BAR**. At one time I seem to recall reading at least one in every few issues.

The expression “cancel my subscription” was common enough that you used it for the title of a book of a collection of letters sent to **BAR** over the years.

Queries & Comments is one of my favorite parts of your magazine—one that I nearly always read first—enjoying even the letters asking that a subscription be canceled (even though I never agree with the reasons given).

Do you publish fewer because you are mellowing with age or because you

get so many that publishing them seems repetitious? Or, perhaps, your readers are becoming mellow and more willing to see the expression of an idea counter to their ingrained belief. I miss seeing those letters in your magazine.

Hurrah! All is not lost! I just got my latest **BAR**, and, lo and behold, I see one such letter in it (“It Was a Miracle, and That Was That,” March/April 2015). I can now be entertained again when I read your letter column.

HERBERT H. BECKWITH
ELLSWORTH, MAINE

We don’t get very many of these cancellation letters anymore. I really don’t know why.—Ed.

Archaeological Views

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going to set our agenda. But this does not mean that we are excavating in a vacuum.

We are cognizant of the results from the previous projects and welcome their analysis and publications as guides to our results. (This past year, Bill Dever just published the High Place,* Joe Seger published *Gezer VII*—the MB strata—and Garth Gilmour *Gezer VI*—the objects from the HUC excavations.) We are aware of the Low Chronology that proposes re-dating to the ninth-century strata traditionally dated to the tenth century. There are issues of ancient state formation and ancient boundaries—whether ethnic or political. Gezer has a long history. The site is important because of its potential to join current issues and debates in the field, not because we needed to prove Solomon’s presence for our faith, nor to support the “American way” of excavations, nor to pick sides in the debates concerning Gezer.

We want Gezer to continue the tradition of offering an excellent field school. We do not attempt to create an environment where everyone thinks the same. We, as directors, have different opinions about the interpretation of our results and the best strategy in the field; we consider this a benefit, as it creates a

*Hershel Shanks, “Commemorating a Covenant,” **BAR**, January/February 2015.

research environment that views the data from broader perspectives. We do not assume we have all the answers; we use staff and other scholars to assist us. We know that a summer dig is a great place for students from different backgrounds to learn about differing religious and political beliefs. As students excavate and build friendships, we hope that they engage in discussions and debates to learn about other viewpoints.

In 2014, as the rockets were flying in the distance, we were acutely aware that archaeologists work in political and religious contexts. The results of our work are not only used to advance the archaeological enterprise but are also used by others for religious and political agenda.

But what do we call Gezer’s famous gate? When was it built? In Solomon’s time or later? We’ll let the results and analysis of our archaeological data determine this. For now, because of stratigraphic data (we have now discovered a previously unrecognized ninth-century phase between the tenth- and eighth-century phases near the city gate), we will hold to the results of the previous excavations and majority view and call it “Solomonic,” realizing Solomon may never have visited Gezer.

Every day in the field, as the sun comes up from the east, it first illuminates the “Solomonic Gate.” While the morning sun plays with this ancient architectural feature and creates shadows, we are reminded that, like many who have gone before us, we are working in the shadow of Solomon.

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Sam Wolff is a senior archaeologist at the Israel Antiquities Authority and senior fellow at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, Jerusalem. He was assistant director of the excavations at Ashkelon and subsequently directed several excavations, including Tel Megadim, Tel Hamid (with Alon Shavit) and Ein Hagit. He has been codirector of the Gezer excavation project since its inception in 2006.