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Empire or Cow Town? National Geographic Looks at the Kingdom of David and Solomon

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Tel Aviv University archaeologist Israel Finkelstein argues that the kingdom of David and Solomon is a greatly embellished biblical fiction. Jerusalem, he argues, was a cow town, a “hill country village.” David was an insurrectionist and bandit whose followers were not a mighty army, but “500 people with sticks in their hands shouting and cursing and spitting.”

All this is reported in the cover story of the December 2010 edition of *National Geographic* magazine. That magazine, you will remember, made its own headlines just a few years ago with the claim of a “Jesus family tomb” which was supposed to cast doubt upon the New Testament accounts of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. That “discovery,” by the way, did not stand up to close investigation.

Now, the magazine wades again into contested and controversial territory in its cover story “The Search for King David.” At least one strand of the article reaches back to 2005, when archaeologist Eilat Mazar announced that she had discovered the palace of King David. More recent developments include the discovery by archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel of Judean ruins in the Elah Valley, which is where the Bible records that David slew Goliath. Add to this the discovery of what may well be a large copper-smelting facility in Jordan by American archaeologist Thomas Levy. All of these discoveries would add much to the case against those who claim that these events did not happen or were greatly embellished.



“In no other part of the world does archaeology so closely resemble a contact sport,” explains *National Geographic*. The claims and counter-claims of archaeologists are used to make arguments for and against the truthfulness and authority of the Bible, for and against the validity of Jewish claims to the land, and for and against any number of related controversies — all of them heated and potentially explosive.

The *National Geographic* article is both interesting and inconclusive. It leaves most of the big questions raised but unanswered. Significantly, the magazine does undermine the case for the “biblical minimalism” school of archaeology that would claim David and Solomon as “simply fictitious characters.”

Nevertheless, Christian readers of the magazine should note a couple of key observations. First, this cover story documents the fact that archaeology is not an exact science and that the discipline is heavily influenced by ideological interests. Claims and counter-claims often have as much or more to do with those contemporary agendas than with the study of ancient civilizations.

Second, Christians should always remember that the truthfulness and authority of the Bible are not based upon any authority external to the Bible itself. There is no external evidence required to “prove” the Bible’s truthfulness. It stands on its own claim to be the Word of God. Archaeology may sell magazines and make for interesting reading, but it cannot prove nor disprove the Bible.

Robert Draper, "Kings of Controversy," *National Geographic*, December 2010.

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