Unearthing King David

Transcript of portions of the discussion from the September 9, 2025 Tangible recording. The recording featured Dr. Yosef Garfinkel, professor of biblical archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Dr. David Adams, professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Jessica Bordeleau, MA, digital publication coordinator at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Bordeleau
Welcome to *Tangible: theology learned and lived*. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I'll talk with a variety of professors and a variety of topics. Something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life because it's tangible; theology learned and lived.

Today we are discussing Judah in the time of David and the archaeological data that informs it. We'll explore the significant discoveries made by archaeologist Dr. Yosef Garfinkel. Dr. Yosef Garfinkel is Professor of Biblical archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and curator of the Museum of Yarmukian Culture at Kibbutz Shaar Hagolan. Dr. Garfinkel has been a visiting scholar at Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, and Kings College in London. He has conducted numerous excavations in Israel, but most notably in Khirbet Qeiyafa. and Kibbutz Sha'ar Hagolan. Dr. Garfinkel is the author of 34 books on ancient architecture and culture, including the book *In the Footsteps of King David; Revelations from an ancient biblical city*. Dr. Garfinkel is at Concordia Seminary today to speak at the Biblical Archaeology Lecture Series. He will deliver a lecture titled *Judah in the Time of David*. Dr. Garfinkel, welcome to the show.

Garfinkel
Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.

Bordeleau
Joining us in the conversation is Dr. David Adams. He's a professor of exegetical theology here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He earned his PhD at Cambridge, served as director of the Office of Government information for the LCMS in Washington DC. As former director of the Concordia Center for Archaeology, he was a member of an excavation staff in Israel. Dr. Adams, welcome back to the show.

David Adams
It's always great to be with you, Bordeleau. Thank you for allowing me to join you today.

Bordeleau
Listeners, if you want to read along with today's episode, you can find transcripts of our discussion at concordiatheology.org.

I'm going to give our listeners a bit of context to our discussion today. So the big question: one way that there would be archaeological evidence of a historical King David would be the data that a Judean kingdom existed in the 10th century BC, when we say that David lived, but many scholars assert that there is only evidence of a Judean kingdom in the eighth or ninth century BC. Dr. Garfinkel, you say there is evidence, tell me more.

Garfinkel

Well, it's very hard to find David himself. It's not possible in archaeology to find one person. What we can see here is a transition from the time of the judges where we have an agrarian and tribal community into urban community and then kingdom. And the big question is when did this transition, when this sociological transition took place. If it would be 1000 BC, it's like the biblical tradition. But scholars, other scholar said: No, it was a hundred years later. 200 years later, some scholars even said it was only 300 years later. Only in the time of Hezekiah did Judah became a real kingdom. And in my excavation in a number of sites, Lachish, Khirbet Qeiyafa, Khirbet Al-Rai, we have clearly fortified cities in Judah in the 10th century BCBC and the earliest one is Khirbet Qeiyafa, 1000 bc. So this is the time of King David. Look, the problem started with Jerusalem because excavating in Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom you would expect to find in the early 10th century BC palaces and elaborate buildings and fortifications.

And Jerusalem is a very complicated archaeological site. It was built and rebuilt and rebuilt, and then it was destroyed and redestroyed many time because Jerusalem is built on a hilly area. Later, construction erase everything and build their monument on bedrock. And in this way we don't have a complete sequence of occupation in Jerusalem.

Something similar happened with David. We have the biblical tradition about King David, but we don't have archaeological level from the time of David. So people start saying there was no David, nobody says there was no kingdom of Jerusalem in the late bones. But this is one of the problem between text and evidence on the ground. They're not always matching with each other. So far, we didn't have evidence about David and Solomon or Rehoboam or the 10th century in general from Jerusalem itself. But what's happened here is that in my excavations, in the, what we call the Judean Shephelah, this is a day walk from Jerusalem, take two days, walk from Jerusalem. We have fortified cities in the time of King David. And the character of the city is Judean. You can see it by the animal bones, by the urban planning, by the pottery and all other aspect of the material culture. They're not Philistine, they're not Canaanite, and theirs no sign from the kingdom of Israel. These are clearly Judean site in the lowland part of the kingdom of Judah.

Bordeleau
What do you mean by the urbanization of the kingdom? What would that look like?

Garfinkel
Okay. If you look at the time of the judges from archaeological point of view, we have about 400 archaeological sites, but all of them are very small. This is urbanism. Instead of living in small villages in tribal community, you have now kingdom city people sitting in fortified cities and you have very hierarchic social order.

Bordeleau
So if you compare life in a village at that time to life in a fortified city; now that was happening more when King David became king. What would be the difference for the people who lived in a village compared to those who lived in a city?

Garfinkel
It's basically like today, people who lived in villages, they have more space. They are more engaged with, uh, cultivation of the land, growing, animals. When you're moving into urban centers, you are confined inside a city wall. So you don't have much space and people living in much more condensed area. And, uh, economic base is not only agriculture. Some of them are porters, some of them are priests, some of them are military personnel. The variety of occupation is much bigger in an urban center.

David Adams
Yeah. One of the things that anthropologists and sociologists will use to distinguish urbanization is this kind of separation of labor or specialization of labor that in most villages, you don't find right? Everybody pretty much does most things for themselves. They may do a little bit of trade, but it's small scale. Whereas once you move into, an urban environment, you might have one person who makes shoes out of leather, and that's all he does. And he trades those for someone else who might import food from a particular place. So you get increased specialization. And along with that, part of that specialization is in government specialization, right? You get people whose full-time job, if you will, is to be a ruler or to supervise the community. And so the emergence of something that we would recognize as kingship, is often associated with the process of urbanization.

Garfinkel
Another thing that in urban centers, usually you have a concentration of wells. And in Khirbet Qeiyafa, for example, we have material object that came from Egypt and from Cyprus and from trans Jordan, and also from the Philistine area. So, and while if you're looking at the small agrarian villages of the time of the judges, you don't have evidence of trade at all.

Bordeleau
So David would've grown up in a village and then drastically changed to being king over a kingdom and built new fortified cities. That would be more of a change in David's life than I would've guessed.

Garfinkel
I'm not even sure that David really lived in a village. It's even possibly was, like pastoral economy because he was herding the goat and sheep in the desert. So it's not even a village. It can be like what we see Bedouin today, he's coming for a very nomadic, group of people probably.

Bordeleau
So at the excavation site in Khirbet Qeiyafa, you made some discoveries that pointed to that kind of a 10th Century. So what discoveries did you make that pointed you to 10th Century BC?

Garfinkel
Now, we discovered a city with houses, city wall gate, piazza, inscription, animal bones, metal object, cultic object. Very, very rich assemblage. Now the question is what is the dating of this city with all the objects that were found inside? The dating is not done by the object. The dating was done by radiocarbon dating. We sent olive pits organic material for dating to Oxford University. This is, they have the best laboratory in the world for hydrocarbon dating. And we have from Khirbert Qeiyafa about 30 date, not one or two, but 30 dates. And we can see the city existed from about 1000 BC till about 970 BC. So it's existed only one generation, and it's a big question or a big debate who built it and who destroyed it? And probably it was built by David and the kingdom of Judah and probably destroyed by the nearby a big Philistine city of Gath.

Bordeleau
Where Goliath was from, from Gath.

Garfinkel
The most famous tradition of fighting between Judah and the kingdom of Gath is the tradition about David and Goliath. And it took place between Socoh and Azekah. And Khirbet Qeiyafa is

located between Socoh and Azekah. And Dr. Adam wrote a whole chapter in one of our books about our excavation report about the location and the geography and the biblical tradition, and put all these things together.

Bordeleau
Dr. Adams, tell me about your chapter.

David Adams
Well, it wasn't nearly as dramatic as Professor Garfinkel makes it out to be.

Garfinkel
No, it was very dramatic because he, he clarified the term *efes damim.*

David Adams
Yes, that's true. I did do that. One of the things that Professor Garfinkel didn't say but implied that many of our listeners wouldn't quite catch, is the idea that archaeology doesn't usually make big advances on the basis of just finding one object. You know, people think of archaeology, think about finding some big thing, some really big important thing, right?

Bordeleau
An Egyptian mummy,

David Adams
You're right, or something famous like that. But most progress in archaeology happens because of the gradual accumulation of information from many different places that that can be assembled together to create a bigger picture. So it's not just finding one coin or one pot or even excavating one city, but it's building up from a vast array of information that's gathered together from different sites to help us build up a picture of how things change and develop in a certain area. And professor Garfinkel's observation about the different cities around Jerusalem kind of highlights that.

Garfinkel
I always like to use the metaphor, and this is: a mosaic floor. You look at the mosaic floor, you see a beautiful picture. But this picture is composed of thousands and thousands of small stones, and together they created a big, beautiful picture. Archaeology is the same. Every site add another stone. Every day that we are excavating, we are adding more stones and more stones. And in the end, the common effort of all these people and expedition and scholars and biblical scholar and ancient near eastern scholars and archaeologists, together we have these beautiful pictures that you see on the mosaic floor.

Bordeleau
So the cities that you're talking about that go along the border, what would those cities look like? Because I know you wrote a little bit about casement walls being hollow or being not hollow. Can you tell me more about that?

Garfinkel
Okay. There are two type of city walls in the ancient near East. Some of them are solid wall. The wall can be two meter or 20 meter, but it's all solid, either built from bricks or stones. That's it. One very massive stone. And of course, this type of city walls are strong. We have another type of city wall, which we call a casement city wall. You have an outer wall, after two meter, you have an inner wall, and in between you have space, open space between. It's like two city wall,

two parallel city walls with space in between. Every six meter or so you have a wall connecting the two city wall, perpendicular walls that connected. So in Khirbet Qeiyafa, for example, the periphery of the city is about 600 meters, and each casement about six meter long. So about a hundred casement were built around the city.

Now, this is not as strong as a solid wall, but it has its own advantages; like you can build it faster because you need less raw material and then its cheaper, again because you need less raw material. And then, you know, every square meter inside the city is very expensive. And if you have rooms also inside the city wall, you have more space in the city. But if an army is taking the city, what you can do, you can quickly fill in one casement to two casement where the enemy is attacking, and then it'll be like a solid city wall.

David Adams
Many of our listeners may remember that in Jericho, the reference to Rehab living in the city wall. That may be the kind of reference to a casement type room in which she lived or partially lived. So this does show up in the Bible, perhaps we can't be certain that's what that passage means, but it's very likely that it probably refers to something very similar to that.

Bordeleau
That would be a safer way to live than like Gideon, right? He lived in a village before this <time>, and there were always groups coming through and raiding. But if you had a fortress wall, then you could be safer from these countries trying to raid or attack you.

Garfinkel
This is one of the differences between tribal community and urban community, because in urban community, you build city walls, but then you need to organize the people to come and build the city wall together. It's not done by one person. Its done by hundreds of people who came and worked for days and days. Hundred, thousands, 10 thousands of working days are needed to build a city wall. You need some authority. You can force the people to come and build. Nobody like to pay tax. Tax in antiquity can be done in two ways. One is part of the agricultural products, and the other one by donating time to the kingdom. And people who donate time to the kingdom had to build fortification to serve in the army, to harvest the king’s land and to do other public activities, and people don't like it.

David Adams
And that's the way that archaeologists can tie together an architectural development, like building a city wall with the recognition that there is now some central authority that has enough power or enough influence to get that job done. And that's evidence for the emergence of that kind of ruler in Judah around 1000 BC.

Garfinkel
And this fits exactly the biblical tradition. So they say “It was not David, it was somebody else, but we don't know his name. And there are no records about him. And David is a legend.” Of course, it's a ridiculous argument. You see that archaeology and the Bible, in this case, fit nicely with each other.

Bordeleau
I think many of our listeners would be interested in knowing more about how you unearth these discoveries, the process of archaeological digs. How would you find a pottery shard with writing on it or a fortified city wall?

Garfinkel
Archaeologists need many qualifications. First of all, you need to have the ability to establish a group of people that will be your staff. This is a BA, MA and PhD student in archaeology that can control the excavation in the field. Then you need volunteers because the excavation usually done with volunteer joining sometime for three weeks, sometime for six weeks. So you need connection with universities that will send student to participate in the dig. Then excavation is extremely expensive. You need a place to live for hundred people, six weeks, this cost ten thousands of dollars. You need buses, transportation back and forth to the site, and then you need photography and measurement of the site, surveyor and so on and so forth. So in one season of excavation cost a lot of money.

And then after the end of the dig, all the volunteers go home very happy and the archaeologist is stuck with 50 boxes with pottery shards, 10 boxes with animal bones and then a few boxes with a metal object and stone object and sometimes seals and sometimes inscription. And then you need to start analyzing all thi huge amount of data. I can analyze pottery, I can analyze some specific material culture categories, but usually we have 10 to 20 different expert. For example, the animal bones. I don't know how to analyze animal bones. So we have an expert who gets it: these are sheep, these are goat, these are cattle, these are pigs and so on. If you have bird bones, a specialist who can analyze the bird bones and tell you which bird, which specific type of bird is it. If you have seashells, you have an expert who said, oh, this came from the Mediterranean, this came from freshwater, this came from Egypt, from Nile.

You see, there's such a degree of specialization that even all the archaeological material need to be analyzed by two, three or four different expert. Depend what you have in your excavations. So today the specialization is so intense that sometime you need 20, 30 different people just to analyze the material that was found. That's why we are excavating, but the results of the excavation are published after 10, 20, 30 years.

David Adams
And in between you have the, the people who do what most people think of as archaeology, which is actually digging into the ground, right? And that's a very slow process. You're working with a trowel or sometimes even with a brush to recover objects. And it's very important when you recover an object to also preserve as much information as you can about the context in which that object is found. So if you find a piece of pottery, you want to make sure that, for example, all the pieces of a, of a single broken pot are able to be identified and kept together so that the specialist can later reconstruct that pot or identify the date that that pot comes from. So there's a very careful recording process that goes along with the actual physical digging that happens. And it's very slow, frankly, it's kind of boring to be honest. Uh, e except when you find something, then people get really excited. Even if they just find a piece of broken pottery, it could be a thrill for them, you know? But for an archaeologist like Professor Garfinkel, all of that is preliminary to the kind of analytic work that it takes to build up the picture that we've been talking about.

Bordeleau
So Dr. Garfinkel, you analyze those pieces. Are you also at the dig? Or are you just at the end, when they send you the 50 boxes?

Garfinkel
No, no, no. I'm at the site every day. I wake up at four o'clock in the morning and we leave the hostel at about 20 to five, and we are arriving to the site at five o'clock just in dawn. As we climb up the side, the sun start rising, we open the container, people take their digging equipment and

people are excavating in squares. We have square five by five meter. In every square there is one archaeologist, a BA, MA or PhD student and three volunteers. And this group stays in the same square the entire season. We don't change people every day. It's a team. They know what's going on in the squares. They know what to do, what not to do. The archaeologist explains to them what to do and why they're doing what they're doing. This is very important. People need to understand what they're doing. You're not just finding pottery shards, okay? You need to understand what is the research question, why we are doing what we are doing. And, this is repeating day after day. I'm staying there till one o'clock, you know, the sun is getting hotter and hotter. Blood, tears and sweat, as you said. And we are here. I'm still, I'm the first to come and the last to leave.

Bordeleau
What has been the most thrilling discovery that you've made?

Garfinkel
The funny thing that, the most important discovery were recognized, not when they were excavated, but some, sometime after a few months or sometime after a number of years. For example, we found a, a broken stone object. So we collected all the stones. It was in a plastic, box because it was heavy after the dig. Two, three weeks after the dig, we gave it to the lady doing conservation for us. And she start cleaning and fixing these stone pieces, which looked like nothing. And then it became a building model, which fit the biblical description of Solomon's Palace and Solomon's Temple. And the description of Solomon palace was very unclear. And a very prestigious biblical commentators said that this is probably the most corrupted text in the Hebrew Bible. Just the description of Solomon's palace. And because we have this miniature building, we can say, "Hey, this is this, this is this. And the text is not corrupted." People simply didn't understand the text because it was technical terms that lost their original meaning over time.

Bordeleau
That is a pretty exciting find.

Garfinkel
But this was recognized only after maybe two, three months.

Adams
Yeah, You know, they didn't just dig that up as one whole piece. It comes about as a result of collecting and preserving and then assembling and analyzing, and then you realize, oh, what we have in front of us helps us to understand some aspect of the text that was obscure before. Now I don't know how many of our listeners are going to get really excited about the architecture of Solomon's palace.

Bordeleau
What I thought it was cool. I'm not an archaeologist, and I thought it was cool.

Adams
It is absolutely cool. But the exciting part for someone like me is the fact that we can now take an aspect of the biblical text that was obscure, and we can be confident that we understand it more clearly. Because the technical term for some of the archaeological structures, we can now physically see what they look like. And we thought we might say, oh, we thought that term might have meant this. It turns out that it means that instead. And that's really exciting for someone like me who's not an archaeological specialist, I like to play in the dirt and pretend that I am, but

I'm not. But reading the Bible, teaching the Bible, that's my job. And the more information that I can get to clarify what the Bible says, the better I could do my job.

Garfinkel
After the construction of all these pieces together, and we got a miniature depiction of a building, I saw it's an elaborate construction, I said, okay, let's see if anything like this is described in the biblical text. And I went and I read the description of David's Palace, and it was not relating at all to this building. And then I continued, and I read Solomon's Palace and Solomon's Temple, and then suddenly I have this moment that you have enlightenment! Suddenly I understood what is written here is what we have in the model! And what is written here we have also in this miniature building. This really was a kind of breakthrough that happened in a second. But in order to have this unique moment in your life, you need to excavate Khirbet Qeiyafa for seven years, and you need to collect all the objects and you need to give the objects for restoration. You know? And if you were not excavating this specific location, but maybe another square, maybe we will never find it.

Bordeleau
And for one second, only you knew all the work paid off you. You were the only one for one second, and you got to tell everyone.

Garfinkel
Yes, indeed.

Bordeleau
The final question in the show is always this, Dr. Adams, what do you want our listeners to remember?

David Adams
I think what I would like our listeners to remember is to recognize that it's not the sensational thing that sometimes gets popularized in the news media. That's really the important thing when it comes to archaeology. I mean, we all hope to find something sensational someday, but as we were talking about earlier, it's really the gradual buildup of the picture that is what archaeology best contributes to our understanding of the ancient world in general, and of the Bible in particular. And so, you know, there's a tendency for people, and I sometimes teach Bible class or something where people will ask these questions and it's though, uh, you know, that they're looking for something spectacular that they can, you know, latch onto and say, this is a really important thing. When, more often it's the mundane small things that lead to understanding and enlightenment. And, I think it's important that people realize that it's not always the glamorous thing that is the important thing.

Bordeleau
Dr. Garfinkel, what would you like our listeners to remember?

Garfinkel
The main problem is minimalist, but it can be relevant to any other aspect of life. That the "lack of data is not data of lack", which mean if you don't have something, doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. It only means that so far, it was not found or so far, it was not discovered. And this was specifically in biblical studies. In archaeology, people like to say "this was not found, this was not found, and this was not found". So they built a theory; this is not the right way to work. You need to build your theories opposite. This was found and this was found and this was found, so you

build a theory. Maybe future discoveries will change or alter your theory, it's possible. But build it on data. Don't build it on the lack of data.

David Adams
Yes. And that's, you know, that's a, an axiom that we always teach students about archaeology; the absence of data is not data of absence.

Garfinkel
Yeah, absence is the right word. I didn't use it.

Adams
Uh, by the way, Yossi, uh, tell the story of the comb.

Garfinkel
Okay. So in one of the scenes in Lachish, a comb was found made from ivory; very small, only three and half centimeters. So it's like two and a half inches, not more than that. And when it was discovered, we didn't clean it because people were thinking maybe there are lice on it. Because sometime you find lice on ancient combs. And indeed there is a lice on it. And they even tried to do DNA analysis on the lice, but it didn't succeed because there was not a good preservation of the DNA in this case. And then after about six years, somebody, not somebody, but Madeleine Mumcuoglu that was working with us for many years. She was looking at the comb with the light from the side, and suddenly she saw letters. And this was given to an epigraphist Dr. Daniel Vainstub, and he read here a whole sentence.

Now the letters are very early. These are the earliest letters in the alphabet. The dating is about 3,800 years ago, just the beginning of the alphabet. That for about 800 years or so, we don't have even one complete sentence. All the inscriptions that were found are always fragmentary. And this was a complete sentence, the earliest sentence ever found in alphabet. We have full page on the New York Times and about 400 different media all over the world wrote about it. And the BBC make a program about it. And it was really a huge, uh, amount of PR for this specific comb. Now, what is written on it, I will tell you, in Canaanite first: "ytš ḥṭ ḏ lqml śʿ[r w]zqt".
It's not even Hebrew, it's Canaanite, the meaning is: “May this ivory erase lice from hair and beard.”

Bordeleau
<laugh>. And there was a prehistoric lice on the comb.

Garfinkel
You are not the first one to laugh. Even the reporter of the New York Times was laughing when I told him the, the meaning of this inscription. It's giving more power to the comb. This is the meaning of the inscription, because people suffered from lice and they didn't have modern chemicals like we have today. So it was a real problem in antiquity. They really want the comb to do the work well. So they put this kind of, you know, uh, not curse, but they wrote something on it to give it the most strength in fighting against ice.

Bordeleau
False advertisement.

Adams

<laugh> But the lesson for us is, or part of the lesson for us, is that this object was found, it was examined, and it didn't seem to be very important. Put in a drawer, forgotten, someone looked at it later. And because they looked at it in a different light, with the light coming from a different angle, they saw something that they had not seen previously. That is the writing.

Bordeleau
How long between the finding the lice and her finding the letters; like how long was it sitting there?

Garfinkel
Nearly six years.

Bordeleau
Six years.

Garfinkel
Unbelievable. Yes. You know, even now when I hold it in my hand, I don't see the inscription because the ivory is very fragile material. And if you engrave deep, it'll be, it'll break. So really in size in a very, very shallow of scratches. And only if you have light from the side, it's possible to see the inscription. Today we have special photographing techniques that you have light coming from different angles and so on, and then the computer puts everything into one picture and you can see it nicely. But when you hold it in your hand with normal light, you will not see the inscription.

Bordeleau
That's fantastic.

Garfinkel
And the question is how many other inscription has been lost? <laugh>.

Adams
Here we have an important discovery related to the very early language that was the predecessor of Biblical Hebrew. And now we have a whole sentence in that language that we never had before, which helps us to understand a little bit better the development of the early Hebrew language. And we only have it because someone happened to look at this comb in a different light than it had been looked at before. And so that's the way archaeology proceeds sometimes not with the glamorous discovery, but with, you know, the slow accumulation of different kinds of evidence

Bordeleau
And a comb with lice on it

David Adams
And a call with lice on it.

Garfinkel
I would like to invite the audience to come and participate in the excavation. All of them can come as volunteers. Join us for two weeks, three weeks as you can.

Bordeleau
That's it for today. I'd like to thank our guests. Uh, Dr. Adams, thank you for being here.

David Adams
It's always a pleasure to be with you, Bordeleau. Thank you

Bordeleau
Dr. Garfinkel, it was wonderful to meet you. Thank you for coming to be on the show.

Garfinkel
And thank you for inviting me.

Bordeleau
And thank you for listening. You can find more episodes of tangible on all the major hosting apps or on our website, concordiatheology.org. We have a lot more free resources there. Check it out. If you'd like to see this show continue, you can subscribe for free, share, and leave a review. I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's tangible theology learned and lived.