

Palestinian destruction of Jewish archaeological sites must be halted

written by David M. Weinberg | 12.07.2024

Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) are rich with Jewish national heritage sites.

It is the Biblical heartland. The physical record of the Biblical narrative lies in the ground with hundreds of known archaeological sites, and perhaps thousands of yet undiscovered sites, providing incontrovertible evidence that connects the Jewish People to the Land of Israel.

This is precisely why the Palestinian Authority is systematically destroying archaeological sites in Judea and Samaria, purposefully plundering and erasing Jewish antiquities.

This week the Government of Israel took a first step towards halting the wanton annihilation of Jewish heritage.

For the first time since Israeli archaeological activists conducted in 2020 a broadscale survey of some 300 sites under Palestinian assault, the government decided to back a bill in Knesset, introduced by Likud MK Amit Halevi, that would extend the purview of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) to Judea and Samaria - to manage and preserve historical sites.

The IAA is a globally respected professional scientific agency with considerable budget, real enforcement capacity, and a theft prevention unit.

Until now, archaeological sites in the West Bank have been the responsibility of the IDF Central Command and its Civil Administration (COGAT) - which have no bandwidth for this issue. The Civil Administration's "Archaeology Staff Officer Office" is a department without clear policy guidelines and with no enforcement capabilities.

The Archaeology Officer hasn't even managed to formally demarcate the boundaries of most heritage sites in Judea and Samaria, making it impossible to prevent illegal PA construction and agricultural projects which (again,

purposefully) overrun these sites.

Archaic interpretations of the Oslo Accords by Israeli legal advisers have gotten in the way too. They have argued against Israel's ability to intervene to protect Jewish heritage sites in Area B of the territories, despite the obvious and outrageous PA campaign to obliterate every Jewish/Israeli site possible.

The 2020 survey was conducted by an NGO called "Preserving the Eternal" and backed by Israel Heritage Preservation Center and the Shiloh Forum. The survey found that 80% of the important archaeological sites in Judea and Samaria (most of which date back to the Second Temple period) were damaged, with half of them in immediate danger of total eradication.

Sites that have experienced extreme devastation

The worst devastation was at sites in Area B, where despite technical Israeli security control (alongside Palestinian civilian control), there is effectively no Israeli control, no law, and no enforcement.

Among the prominent heritage sites in Area B that are subject to severe and continuous damage are Joshua's Altar on Mount Ebal, the Hasmonean fortress at Tel Aroma, and large sections of ancient Samaria (Sebastia) - the capital of the biblical Kingdom of Israel.

Institutional PA efforts to destroy Jewish heritage sites (and Christian sites too, including many churches from the Byzantine period) are supported, alas, by an international network of foreign state entities that directly or indirectly fund destructive activities.

This is coupled with an international academic boycott against archaeological researchers working in Judea and Samaria, which impedes theoretical and applied research on the archaeological sites of Judea and Samaria, and which indirectly encourages their neglect and eventual destruction.

PERHAPS the most terrible story is the ongoing saga on Mount Ebal near Nablus, where a dramatic and large archaeological site has been identified from the early Biblical period.

The late Prof. Adam Zartal and many of his archaeological disciples have identified this site as the altar of Joshua (see the Book of Joshua chapter 8) where

a dramatic ceremony reaffirming God's covenant with the Jewish People was held after the early stages of conquest of the Land of Israel. Ancient Hebrew writing was found on an amulet at this site, along with unique burnt bone fragments and potsherds that underpin Zartal's thesis.

Zartal began paying protection money to the local Palestinian landowner to protect the site, because it wasn't demarcated as a heritage site by the IDF Archaeology Officer, and Zartal knew that the global sensation that his discovery drew would lead to Palestinian attacks.

But the land was sold to a Hamas-affiliated Palestinian who drew-up plans with the PA to pave over the site with roads and 24 high-rise housing units.

Indeed, in 2001 the PA paved a road encircling the site that destroyed part of the area. This included the grinding into gravel of part of the ancient stone fencing at the site, and then using the gravel to pave the road.

A large group of the most prominent Israeli archaeologists (including Zartal critics and anti-Biblical-narrative archaeologists at Tel Aviv University including many Israel Prize laureates in archaeology) twice signed a public petition to then-Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Prime Minister Netanyahu demanding protection for the "altar" site on Mount Ebal; to no avail.

In January 2023, a Palestinian building contractor started again to plow-up the area. An Israeli officer even found the PA plans to destroy the entire site inside one of the tractors in operation.

An Archaeology Staff Officer then acted to demarcate the site as a protected site, but the Civil Administration insisted that the line be drawn narrowly around only the "altar" without the surrounding plain where the biblical "swearing-in ceremony" may have been held and which could be an archaeologically rich zone. The excuse: insufficient legal authority. The battle continues.

Another infuriating story relates to the incredible aqueduct identified as King Solomon's magnificent water system in Judea that runs from Hebron through Bethlehem to Jerusalem, including what is today termed "Solomon's Pools," southwest of Bethlehem.

This marvel of ancient engineering, 40 km. long, is described in detail in the

Bible, and the description matches the archaeological findings precisely. The pools and aqueducts survived 2,000 years of summer and winter and many invaders and predators - until the arrival of the Palestinian Authority.

In 2022, the PA dug an enormous 1,500-dunam quarry pit at Beit Fajar right through a section of the aqueduct. The quarrying caused irreversible damage to the aqueducts, with some 100 m. of tunnel and approximately 2,000 m. The Government of Israel did nothing to stop this.

This is the place to point out that PA-directed destruction of Jewish heritage sites in Judea and Samaria is a gross and explicit violation of the Oslo Accords and all relevant international legal frameworks, including heritage preservation obligations under UNESCO (which the PA joined in 2011), and the World Heritage Convention (known as ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites).

The flip side of this is that the government of Israel has been derelict in its international heritage preservation legal obligations too (in addition to its responsibility for Jewish memory and historical truth), under provisions of The Hague Convention and Jordanian law which still partially apply in the West Bank.

The Israeli Supreme Court in particular has been a comatose, regressive actor in this ongoing saga - foregoing opportunity and after opportunity to force the hand of the Israeli government into action against Palestinian destruction-ism.

The sad result to-date is truly annihilationalist: Three thousand years of heritage on its way to near-complete wipe-out within a mere 30 years. This is a tragedy that must be stopped.

I salute the activist archaeologists and Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Amichai Eliyahu, MK Amit Halevi, and others who have driven this matter to the government table. Clear policy directives must be issued to the IAA, IDF, Israel Police, and Israel Security Agency to prioritize the preservation of heritage sites in Judea and Samaria and to punish the PA for its belligerence.

Preservation and protection is a necessity so that something of biblical heritage remains for future generations. So that the land of the Bible is not erased by Palestinian aggression and denialism.

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