And other archaeologists note that the lack of evidence for neighboring villages could be due to their establishment on exposed bedrock, leaving few traces behind.

When pressed, however, Jerusalem archaeologists admit that their dating remains maddeningly imprecise. “We don’t have firm dates until we get to [Assyrian King] Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E.,” says Rainey. “The question is whether radiocarbon dating can solve anything.” Barkai is deeply skeptical. “Given the margin of error, radiocarbon allows everyone to argue the position they already hold,” he says. “Carbon-14 is like a prostitute.” But others acknowledge that resolving the conflict ultimately depends on more samples to provide absolute dating—which means firmly anchoring the pottery to radiocarbon dates. “There is no other way,” says Ayelet Gilboa, a Haifa University archaeologist who is part of the radiocarbon team.

Amid the dispute, which at times appears bitter and deeply personal, there are signs of a convergence. “We all agree Jerusalem was not a major city, it was a small town,” says Amihai Mazar. Adds Herschel Shanks, editor of Biblical Archaeological Review: “It wasn’t this big wonderful thing … but a capital of a few small villages.” Cahill agrees that although Jerusalem was “a splendid city” compared to other highland towns, it was “a poor and sad place” compared to the metropolises of its day. For his part, Finkelstein acknowledges that Jerusalem may have expanded starting as early as 970 B.C.E.—in the late 10th century and only 50 years later than the position held by Cahill.

Divisive agendas, however, are inherent in the debate. Eilat Mazar’s work is done in partnership with the Ir David Foundation, which says it is dedicated to “strengthening Israel’s current and historic connection to Jerusalem.” Mahmoud Hawari, a Palestinian archaeologist at Oxford University, warns that “you cannot avoid a political and ideological motivation in discussing David and Solomon. Biblical archaeology has tried to prove that link and has served modern Zionism.” But Mazar defends her funding. “I’m doing pure research, and no one tells me what to do or write.”

Ultimately, better data from tools such as radiocarbon dating could provide a clearer picture of the ancient city. Gilboa believes a wave of data could lead to “a new and more vigorous biblical archaeological” that uses the Bible as a guide rather than diktat. That approach might allow archaeologists to shed more light—and generate less heat—on Jerusalem’s Iron Age predecessor.

—ANDREW LAWLER

Holy Land Prophet or Enfant Terrible?

By suggesting that biblical figures such as David and Solomon were, at most, unimposing tribal chieftains ruling from a nondescript hill town, Israel Finkelstein has made himself a lightning rod. His controversial views about what took place 3000 years ago touch a nerve among many nonacademic Israelis, evoking angry letters in the country’s newspapers from people questioning his patriotism.

It’s an ironic position for a self-described “mainstream Zionist” who grew up in the first Zionist settlement in what is today Israel. The 57-year-old Tel Aviv University professor is the ringleader of a small number of researchers who dispute the way archaeologists date their finds in the area around Jerusalem (see main text). If these scholarly renegades are correct, then the military exploits of Joshua, the brave deeds of David, and the wisdom of Solomon may be no more historical than the medieval tales of King Arthur. Finkelstein says he wants to bring modern techniques to a rather fusty field that in his view depends too heavily on biblical texts—but his critics suspect his real goal is to grab the media spotlight.

Finkelstein insists he didn’t go looking for trouble. He recalls a “perfectly normal” childhood in which he pestered his parents to take him to archaeological sites. And until the 1980s, he published papers backing the conventional archaeological chronology. He used pottery to date sites and assumed that the biblical texts provided a good road map for excavators. But that changed in the early 1990s, when Palestinian uprisings forced him to give up digs in the highlands north of Jerusalem. He moved to the lowland city of Megiddo, 150 kilometers north. Famed as the New Testament site of Armageddon, the ancient town was the home of an impressive gate and palace long considered Solomonic.

At Megiddo, Finkelstein sensed something fundamental was wrong with the dating, so he plunged into carbon-14 sample gathering, which at the time was rarely used at historical sites. “Radiocarbon opened the way to put ourselves on solid ground, free of all these arguments about the Bible,” he says. At about the same time, a team of researchers from several Israeli universities independently began to conduct carbon-14 analyses. They say they have good—although not conclusive—evidence that the conventional dating in the north of Israel is off by a century. That would mean the Megiddo structures were built after Solomon—and after the biblical united kingdom—by local rulers.

The radiocarbon data fueled Finkelstein’s interest in, and suspicions of, the biblical accounts. After in-depth study, he says he decided that much of what was written about the era of David and Solomon was done long after the fact for political purposes. That conclusion led him to question archaeological work in Jerusalem, where he has never excavated. And it also created a political and religious as well as an academic firestorm.

In the wake of the Holocaust, Israeli leaders, although secular, drew on the stories of fierce fighters and wise kings to create what Finkelstein calls “the myth of the new Jew, the fighting Jew.” His critics—at meetings, in books, and in newspapers—railed against him as irresponsible and sensationalist. “He’s a radical, politically and otherwise,” says William Dever, an archaeologist emeritus at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Dever has worked in Israel for 50 years and has known Finkelstein since he was a high school student. “Even then, he was insufferable,” Dever maintains. “For him, this is a kind of game and an ego trip. … He has become too outrageous.”

Jane Cahill, an archaeologist associated with Hebrew University, agrees that Finkelstein “requires his detractors to carry the burden of proof” and that he “resorts to bellicose rhetoric.” Finkelstein dismisses the criticism as the last gasp of a conservative establishment that is suspicious of new techniques, fears undercutting the Bible, and is jealous of someone who works well with the media; Finkelstein is a frequent television commentator, and his book sales are brisk. But he admits that he can come across as something of a bully. “I have a big mouth, and I know how to protect myself—I’m streetwise.”

But even Finkelstein feels the heat sometimes. At a recent conference in Washington, D.C., he purposely avoided a session on 10th century B.C.E. Jerusalem. “It’s not good for my health,” he explained with a hint of embarrassment. “I have daughters, and I have to try to survive.” —A.L.