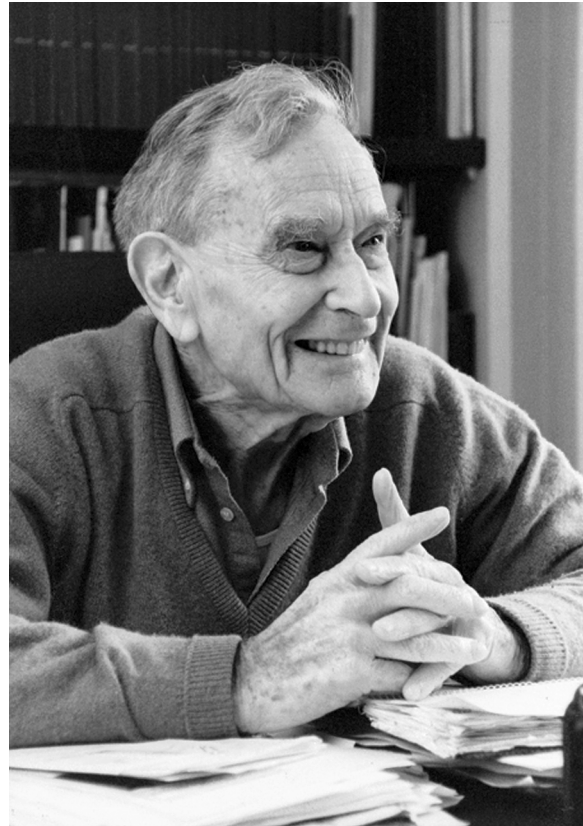


Avraham Biran (1909–2007)

The first portion of this memorial appreciation is a recounting of Avraham Biran's scholarly and public achievements. The second portion is a more personal recollection.

Avraham Biran was born Avraham Bergman in Ottoman-ruled Palestine in 1909. He lost both his parents at the age of 13 and went to live with his grandparents for the duration of his high-school years. He matriculated at Haifa's Reali School. In 1927–1928 Biran earned his teaching certificate at the David Yellin Teachers Seminary in Jerusalem, and from 1928 until 1930 he taught high school students at his alma mater, the Reali School. As a young student, Biran was drawn to historical geography, Bible studies, and archaeology, and he wished to pursue these fields in higher education. So in 1930 he crossed half the globe to the United States where, initially, he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania as an undergraduate (it was the first school that sent him a letter of acceptance, so that's where he went!). During that first year Biran (still Bergman) went to see a former student in Baltimore. It was there, almost as a lark, that he paid a visit to William Foxwell Albright, at Johns Hopkins University. Albright was impressed by Biran's fluency in Hebrew, Arabic, and the Bible and offered the young man the possibility of direct enrollment in the graduate school with a scholarship. Biran became Albright's first Ph.D. student.

After finishing his Ph.D., Biran returned to Palestine in 1935 and spent two years as Thayer Fellow at the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. During this time he worked with Nelson Glueck at Tell Kheleifeh near Aqaba, with Ephraim Speiser at Tell Khafaje and Tepe Gawra in Iraq, and at Ras el-Kharrubeh outside Jerusalem, which Albrecht Alt had identified with biblical *Anatot*. As editor of *BASOR* at the time, Albright encouraged Biran to publish the results of this, his first independent project, in *BASOR* (Bergman 1936a; 1936b). In the same issue of *BASOR*, immediately following Biran's (i.e., Bergman's) article, Albright published his own rebuttal of Bergman's proposal (Albright 1936). Biran



liked to tell this story as an illustration of Albright's approach to students and to scholarship. Biran was to return to Ras el-Kharrubeh much later, in 1983, for a brief season (Biran 1985).

By 1937, prospects for a paid career in archaeology in Palestine were not looking good. Biran was offered a job that meant leaving archaeology, but it paid well and offered the opportunity to serve his people. After consulting with Albright, he became the British Mandate authority's district officer for the Beth Shean Valley, a post he filled until 1945 (for a first-hand account of Biran's career as an administrator in the British mandate administration, see Shanks 1999: 11–14). Though occupied with administrative matters, Biran did manage to do some archaeological survey with Ruth Amiran (then Ruth Brandsteter) in

the Jezreel Valley, which was published in Hebrew (Bergman and Brandtsteter 1941).

Biran became district officer for Jerusalem in 1945 and held this post until Israel's declaration of independence in May 1948. Shortly after Jerusalem changed hands, the new Israeli regime asked him to continue in a similar role, which he did until 1955. It was at this time that Biran changed his name from Bergman to Biran, a Hebraized name which included the first, last, and middle letters of his former name and referred to the *birah* or capital (Jerusalem).

In 1951, Biran was appointed chairman of the Government Names Committee whose mandate was to establish Hebrew names for landforms and places with Arabic names. Many Israeli towns and villages and many mountains and watercourses were named by this committee, generally adopting the methodology of toponymy in conjunction with the biblical text (cf. Aharoni 1979: 105–30). From 1955 to 1961, Biran was an employee of the Foreign Ministry, which appointed him as its first consul general for the western states of the United States of America. On his return to Israel in 1958, he directed armistice affairs in the Foreign Ministry, particularly concerning negotiations with Jordan.

Biran became head of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums in 1961, replacing Shmuel Yeivin. These were the first “golden years” of Israeli archaeology, when sites such as Arad, Beersheba, Masada, Gezer, Hazor, Megiddo, and Jerusalem were excavated, mostly by Israeli teams. Biran made it a point to assist these expeditions to carry out their work with little interference—there is little record of discord. The archaeological community was small at the time, and archaeological sites seemed to be an infinite resource (Biran, personal communication). Biran was also active in the establishment of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1964, ensuring that the most significant finds would be displayed in the national showcase.

While director of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, Biran codirected excavations at Ein Gev (with B. Mazar, M. Dothan, and E. Dunayevsky) and at Tel Zippor (with Ora Negbi) in the 1960s. In 1966, he embarked upon excavations at Tel Dan, initially in the way of a salvage project. The tel was a forward position of the Israel Defense Forces, with the Syrian army just over the border to the south and east and the Lebanese Army to the north. The tel was being dug up for gun emplacements, communications trenches, and bunkers, and much damage was done to the upper strata (Biran 1994: 7). His mentor, Albright,

had always been intrigued by Tell el-Qadi (e.g., Albright 1924–1925: 16–18; 1935: 193–95), and he seems to have passed this interest on to Biran. Excavations began on the southern flank of the site, in a trench sheltered from Syrian guns (Area A). The Tel Dan excavations went on to become the longest ongoing archeological excavation in Israel, running for a total of 33 seasons before Biran terminated active excavation in 1999.¹

Tel Dan provided a rich array of finds—defensive, architectural, ritual, epigraphic, and biblical—allowing Biran to shift his attention from interest to interest. The Middle Bronze Age fortifications and mudbrick gate, the Late Bronze Age “Mycenaean” tomb, the Iron Age “high place” and fortifications, and the Iron Age I remains that he interpreted as evidence for the migration of the Danites (Judges 18) were all the subjects of publication. Following a series of articles, mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, Biran wrote his popular book *Biblical Dan* (1994; a Hebrew version was published in 1992). I think that in this, as in many things, he viewed Yigael Yadin's popular book *Hazor* (1975) as a model (he even approached the publisher Wiedenfeld and Nicolson initially).²

In 1974, he retired from the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums (later to become the Israel Antiquities Authority) and became director of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. Here he assembled a team of loyal workers, cultivated his patrons, and continued his public work on behalf of Israeli archaeology. Excavations at Tel Dan continued, and other projects were begun at Tel Aroer (initially together with Rudolf Cohen), Tel 'Ira (in conjunction with Y. Beit Arie), Ras el-Kharrubeh, and Yesod Hama'alah. Biran also shepherded the construction of a new facility for the Nelson Glueck School and the new Skirball Museum of Biblical Archaeology on the Jerusalem campus, both completed in 1987. Biran retired as head of the Nelson Glueck School in 2003 at the age of 93.

During his tenure at the Nelson Glueck School, Biran remained active in the Israel Exploration Society and was elected chairman of the executive committee in 1976, following Yigael Yadin's resignation to pur-

¹ Chronicles of the excavations were published by Biran in *Dan I* and *Dan II* (published in Jerusalem: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1996 and 2002, respectively).

² A list of Biran's publications through 1991 can be found in the Avraham Biran festschrift published in the *Eretz-Israel* series (Volume 23), edited by E. Stern and T. E. Levy (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1992).

sue a political career. It was in this function that Biran expedited, together with Joseph Aviram, the two “Biblical Archaeology Today” conferences, held in Jerusalem in 1984 and 1990, out of which two important edited volumes were published in 1985 and 1993, respectively. Biran also organized the “Temples and High Places in Biblical Times” colloquium on behalf of Hebrew Union College in 1977 (proceedings published under his editorship in 1981).

In 2002, he received the Israel Prize, the highest honor awarded by the State of Israel. Biran was awarded the Israel Prize not only in honor of his scholarly work, but also to pay homage to his contribution to Israeli public and cultural life in the wider sense.³

* * *

I first began working for Avraham Biran in December 1986, when I was a young graduate student and he was 78 years old and already a pensioner of both the Foreign Ministry and Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums. One of the Nelson Glueck School staff members, Dalia Pakman, brought me to his modest office at the Hebrew Union College campus in Jerusalem, where his long-time assistant, Hanni Hirsch, clued me in: “Please address the director as Dr. Biran.” I was bemused by this at first, because in Israel it was, and still is, usual for students and workers to be on a first-name basis with their professors or employers. Perhaps the formality was a result of being educated in the American system and having held a position of authority during the British Mandate. Certainly it was an effective means of maintaining distance, hierarchy, and order. His contemporaries, however, generally addressed him as “Biran.”

When I entered his office, Biran sat behind his desk, smoking a cigar. “Come in, come in!” he greeted me with his big, hearty voice. “Sit down. Tell me about yourself: you have five minutes.” I did so in three—overlong perhaps. “I want you to prepare the Middle Bronze Age tombs for publication. Do you think you can do this?” I said “yes,” of course, and he called Dalia (not with the phone, but with his characteristic bellow) to put me to work.

A week later, having gone through the material and realizing that the tombs were, in fact, inside the settlement, I scheduled an appointment with the boss

and explained that I thought we should publish the Middle Bronze Age material together, with a chapter on the tombs. But Biran had made up his mind and there was no changing it. “First do the tombs. We can do the other things later.” I am not sure *why* he wanted it done this way; perhaps he felt that the tombs were clear, discrete contexts that could be dealt with on their own merits, while the surrounding contexts were more amorphous, particularly because the exposures at Tel Dan were quite limited at this depth. I think, too, that Biran appreciated the Jericho tomb volumes published by Kathleen Kenyon in 1960 and 1965 and the *Megiddo Tombs* volume published by P. L. O. Guy in 1938.

Digging with Biran was a pleasant, orderly, and intimate affair. For one thing, Tel Dan, the only place he excavated after 1983, is a beautiful, serene place with cold, flowing water and big shady trees. Anyone who has worked there falls in love with the site, and for Biran, Tel Dan was an everlasting romance. Biran was happy there, and his affection and enthusiasm were contagious. Professionally, we had our differences at times, as every expedition does. He rarely permitted exposures of more than a few 5-meter squares in any one field in any given season, a practice that field supervisors found frustrating—a barrier to contextual understanding. Indeed, putting such narrow exposures together has complicated the process of publication. But there was a rationale behind Biran’s excavation strategy; he was asking highly focused questions and trying to answer them within the span of a single season, always conscious of “time’s winged chariot.” Indeed, Avraham Biran never bit off more than he could chew. He was extremely effective at budgeting his time and not taking on more than he could accomplish. In this way he never disappointed, always meeting his commitments.

Biran was a sink-or-swim man. His own life story had taught him that if you want something, you have to go out and get it. And you should always have a plan, a strategy. If one of his staff asked permission to publish something, he would usually say no. If he asked you to publish something, that was another matter. But there was a third option: if you submitted a paper for publication and it was accepted by a peer-reviewed journal and you informed him, *that* passed muster. He expected you to go out and take what you earned, as he did (see interview with Biran, Shanks 1999).

Biran was a man of supreme self-confidence. He enjoyed projecting his booming tenor over the heads of a large group at Tel Dan, or in a lecture hall filled

³ The Israel Prize committee’s justification can be accessed at the Israel Ministry of Education’s Hebrew website: <http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/PrasIsrael/Tashsab/AvrahamBiran/NimokyHasoftimAvramBiran.htm>.

to the brim. I think he secretly enjoyed it when the sound system was on the blink. His powerful voice was still effective well into his 90s. Biran devoted more time than any scholar I have ever known in preparing his public lectures. To him, these were as important as his articles. He would take two weeks going through his slides to find just the right ones and to organize them in just the right way. These slides were the backdrop to what were widely recognized as some of the most entertaining lectures on the circuit. Biran was an actor, as all good lecturers are. His lectures were always delivered as stories, with plots. Generally, some riveting question, some mystery, was involved. He built dramatic tension until, bang!—the key discovery was made and the mystery solved. I can remember looking out at audiences and actually seeing people sitting at the edge of their seats. I am not just talking about popular lectures; even at the annual scholarly meetings of the American Schools of Oriental Research, which he attended faithfully almost every year, Biran always filled the biggest lecture hall. Biran knew, and he was confident enough to act on this knowledge, that even scholars like to be entertained.

Aside from his beautiful Hebrew and English, Biran could speak and read French and Arabic fluently. This always gave him an advantage in his dealings with scholars, workers, and diplomats. He enjoyed seeing their reactions when they realized that he could be approached on an even playing ground, that he had insight into, and valued, their language and culture. How envious we were that he could joke with the Druze workers at Tel Dan in Arabic.

Biran was studiously apolitical, above the fray. He would not be drawn into political polemics and did not want to be associated with one camp or the other. Like many of Israel's founding generation, he loved the hilltop villages, cultivated terraces, and ancient sites of Judea and Samaria—they were part of the biblical Land of Israel that he was weaned on. He identified with the pioneer spirit of the settler movement and always made sure to provide a venue for archaeologists working in the occupied territories. But he was always a pragmatist and knew the ways of the world; he expected that current geopolitics would not allow for the dream of a Greater Israel to be consummated. Moreover, he could cite discussions with Palestinian and Jordanian officials from the 1940s and 1950s that led him to conclude that Israel would only achieve a *modus vivendi* with its Arab neighbors from a position of strength.

Biran's approach to human relations and politics influenced his attitudes and actions with regard to controversial issues in archaeological policy. Here too, he consciously refrained from publicly staking out clear positions. As a pragmatist, he felt that the plunder of archaeological sites and the commerce in illicit antiquities could not be completely eradicated. He favored, therefore, a monitored, legal antiquities trade, though he respected the views of those who disagreed. However, when I wrote a negative editorial in the *Jerusalem Post* in the early 1990s about the recently opened Bible Lands Museum, and when the then-director of that museum wrote him a letter of protest, Biran called me into his office and notified me that if I continued to write such pieces, I would be out of a job. The point was that one must maintain a good relationship with all institutions and with people of influence. You can have disagreements in private and you can try to influence people behind the scenes, but you should not disparage colleagues in a public forum—that was bad form.

Biran invested great effort in personal relations with colleagues, friends, and contributors. Much time was spent writing letters, making phone calls, and entertaining guests in Jerusalem. This took him away from his research, but it was something he truly enjoyed, and he, in turn, brought great pleasure to his friends and colleagues. He was a master storyteller and a source of endless anecdotes about colorful people and events from times long past.

Like so many men of action, he had a short attention span and little patience for speakers who didn't get to the point. When touring an active excavation, he had no compunction about cutting a field supervisor, or even a dig director, short. Sometimes we were grateful, sometimes not. Certainly this attitude, and his booming voice, made him the right person to run unruly meetings. They always ended on time. And Biran was always punctual.

One of the secrets of Biran's longevity and good health may have been his eating habits. He ate a light breakfast, no lunch, and a light dinner. I never saw him take a big meal. On our full-day trips up to Tel Dan, he could easily skip eating altogether. Thankfully, Hanni put her foot down, so that we youngsters could have a falafel or a burger on the way back. He did have a sweet tooth, though. There was always some hard candy or chocolate in his desk drawer. My children discovered this at some point: I'm not sure when or how. But when they came to visit me in the office, they would disappear for a time and reappear

with something in hand or mouth, a gift from “the boss.” Hanni later told me that they didn’t wait for it to be offered: they just went in and asked for candy. He appreciated the honesty and directness of children.

The discovery of the “House of David” inscription in 1993, at the twilight of his career, was a fitting culmination to an eventful and blessed life. This inscription was the big payoff for all the years of effort at Tel Dan, and it embodied the spirit of his search. For Avraham Biran was an archetypal “biblical archaeologist,” in the tradition of his teacher W. F. Albright. He accepted the idea of ancient editors, anachronisms and scribal errors, but Biran never doubted that the Bible comprised the essential ancient history of the Land of Israel. He felt that good

archaeology could be done with the Bible in hand, so to speak, and he was almost personally insulted when younger scholars disparaged this approach. For Biran, the “House of David” inscription was a vindication of his cultural paradigm and just in the nick of time. We should all be so blessed.

Avraham Biran died on September 16, 2008, aged 98. He was predeceased by his wife of almost 70 years, Ruth (née Frankel) and survived by his two sons Ronny and David, his daughter Naomi, three grandsons, and one great granddaughter.

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