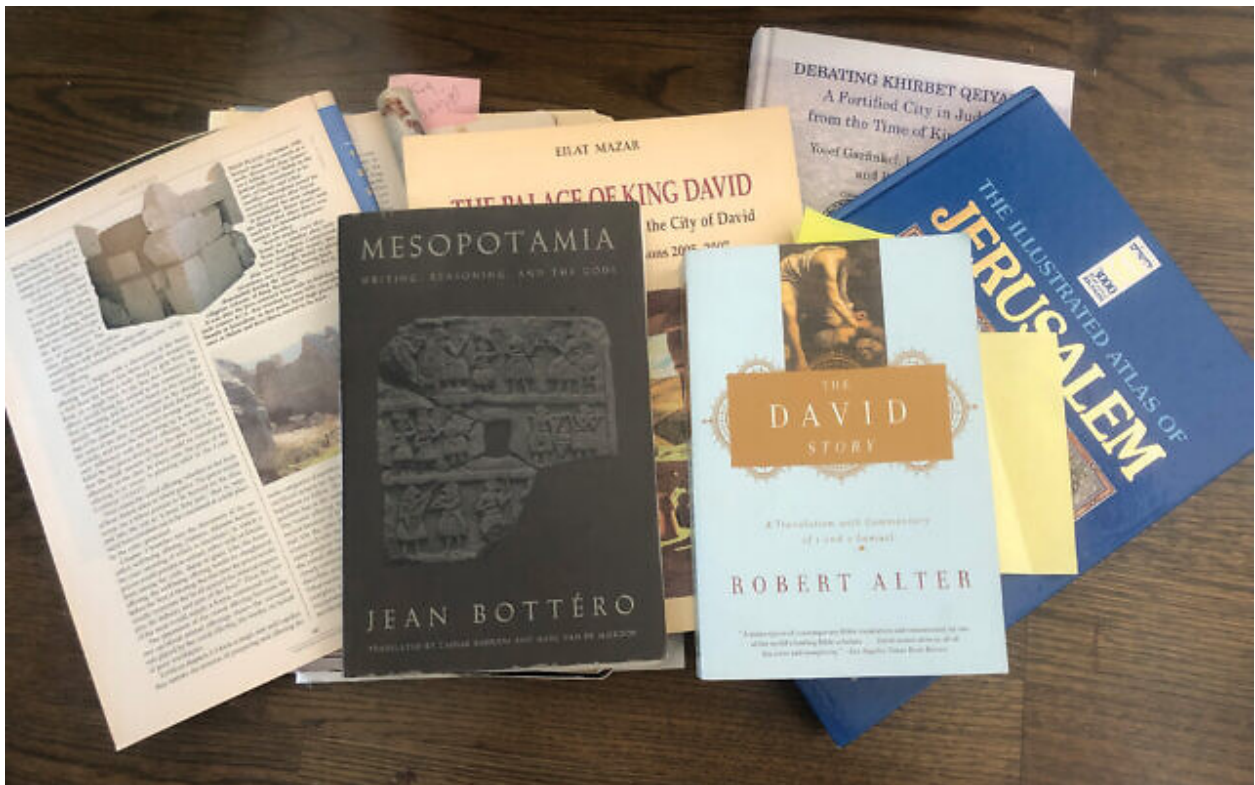


A Novel Escape from New York City

Slipping the present by delving into the biblical past.

By Angel Himsel June 9, 2020



The author's desk, with "research" for a novel that takes place in the time of King David. Courtesy of Angela Himsel

On the floor next to my desk, copies of Biblical Archaeology Review magazine are open to articles pertaining to discoveries in the Philistines' cities. I have Robert Alter's masterful translation of the two Samuels, "The David Story," James Pritchard's "The Ancient Near East" and other scholarly books that thrillingly describe the Jebusites, the Hittites and other "ites" of the time.

I'm working on a historical novel that takes place in the time of King David and thus, research. Under any circumstances, I love research, both when it answers the questions I'm asking and when it leads me in unexpected directions. When I wrote my memoir, "A River Could be a Tree," I delved into the historically tense and often deadly relationship between my parents' Catholic and Lutheran ancestors. I spent hours on the phone with my childhood friend Alise, mining her recollections of our cult-like church as well as her awful grandmother. Alise regaled me with how she had to cut her grandma's gnarly toenails. The toenails were irrelevant to my life, and my plans for the book, but I included them in my memoir because some stories deserve to be told.

These days, in the midst of the pandemic that has shut down America, research also serves as a virtual escape from New York City and its unremitting sound of sirens.

I've re-read the books of Samuel and discovered 2 Samuel 21:19 claims a guy named Elhanan killed Goliath! I'm going to stick with "David and Goliath." "Elhanan and Goliath" doesn't have quite the same ring.

After the Philistines captured the Israelites' holy Ark of the Covenant that contained the Ten Commandments, they were struck down by their own plague — maybe hemorrhoids, maybe erectile dysfunction (I'm not making this up), depending on which biblical scholar you ask. They sent that ark back right quick.

When I sit down to write, I go off in the directions the research has led me. Turns out according to recent DNA testing, David's enemies, the Philistines, probably hailed from modern-day Greece and its islands. They brought iron weapons to the land. They were not the uncivilized brutes that the term "Philistine" connotes today. This knowledge will color the way I depict them. Weaving all of this material into a novel is like herding cats: how to pull together Goliath, David and his many wives and children, King Saul and the other Israelites and make them relevant? Who were they, these people we think we know from the words of the Bible or from archaeology?

Unlike when I was writing my memoir, I can't text the relevant characters, say Bathsheba, and ask, "Hey, Bath, did you really wanna have sex with David or was it like marching orders?"

I can't spend a half hour talking to King Saul, asking him why he had such a nasty temper and tried to kill his son, and what about those painful migraines? I can't elicit from David what went wrong in his marriage to Michal who, by the way, is the only woman in the Bible of whom it says she "loved" a man — David.

What I can do is try to inhabit their lives as fully as possible. Instead of socially distancing myself from them, I attempt to bridge the distance, live with them intimately and let them live within me. Then, the wail of ambulances is finally shushed, and I can hear Michal weeping that she never had the opportunity to have children.

After spending hours writing dialogue between the characters and setting the scene, the cats become easier to herd. I re-read what I've written. Hmmm, how many times should a character greet someone with, "Peace be upon your house?" Would David have addressed his wife as "Michal" or "My lady?" Were husbands and wives on a first name basis in biblical times?

It's 6:30, I'm not sure what day it is, but I need food so I reluctantly leave the safety of Iron Age Israel and re-enter a precarious 21st-century New York City. I put on my facemask to protect others and me from invisible cooties and make a quick dash to the grocery store. Exiting the store, it's 7 p.m., and the city has come together to unite in the familiar clapping, pot banging, trumpet — and shofar — blowing to honor the hospital workers who are trying to rein in a plague that, in a manner not unlike that of unherdable cats, has overrun the city. I stop on the sidewalk, put my grocery bag down, and clap. Then I continue home. On the sidewalk in front of me, a woman in scrubs pauses and listens to the clapping. She wipes a tear from her eye. And that's a story that deserves to be told.

Angela Himsel, who lives in Manhattan, is the author of the memoir, *"A River Could be a Tree"* (Fig Tree Books LLC).

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