

Does Biblical Archaeology Help The Case For Biblical Reliability? Page 2 by Walter C.Kaiser, Jr

II. MISSING PEOPLES MENTIONED IN THE BIBLE

Genesis 10:15 mentioned the "Hittites" as descendants of Canaan, but up until 1906, this was also regarded as another error by post Enlightenment scholars. But in 1906, Hugo Winckler began excavating at ancient Hattusha (Modern Bogazkoy) in present day Turkey. What he found was the center of Hittite life and culture. The documents that bore evidence to the Hittite language now fill a series of volumes from the University of Chicago that look like the volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica in its length and the number of words defined and discussed.

Another mystery group of peoples were the Horites (also known as the Hurrians), which in the Bible were descendants of Seir the Horite (Gen 36:20). Late in 1995 word came that the capital city of the Horites, Urkesh, had been discovered beneath the modern city of Tell Mozan, some 400 miles northeast of Damascus, on the border of present day Turkey. Dr. Giorgio Buccellati, emeritus professor at UCLA, announced that after eight years of excavating, he had found the Horites and their culture from 2300 – 2200 B.C. The three hundred acre site yielded 600 items of epigraphic materials or clay seals. Dr. Buccellati concluded, "The Hurrians now have names and faces."

There is also an enigmatic reference to "the land of the eastern peoples" in Genesis 29:1. Who were these people Jacob came across in his journeys and where did they

reside? The Scriptural text places Jacob at this point in a place known as "Aram Naharaim," or "Syria of the two rivers," a site east of the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia and situated between the Balikh and Habur Rivers.

More on this phrase, "the land of the eastern peoples" was disclosed in the delightful Egyptian story of "Sinuhe" (ca. 1900 B.C.). Sinuhe was a high government official, who fled Egypt for reasons of state. After a series of hardships, the story tells how he reached the country of the "East," (Egyptian, Kedem) in Syria, which is probably the very same general area as "the land of the eastern peoples." Thus, the "eastern lands" seemed to refer to the lands east of Egypt, covering modern Israel, Syria and northern Iraq.

Sinuhe described these lands this way:

[It was] a good land ... figs were in it, and grapes. It had more wine than water. Plentiful was its honey, abundant in olives. Every [kind of] fruit was on its trees. Barley was there, and immer [an early type of wheat]. There was no limit to any [kind of] cattle. Bread was made for [Sinuhe] as daily fare, wine as daily provisions, cooked meat and roast fowl, beside the wild beasts of the desert, for they hunted for [Sinuhe] and laid it before [him], besides the catch of [his own] hand.²

This description parallels very closely the description of the land of Canaan as Moses gave it in Deuteronomy 8:7-9.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and the hills, a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

Names and descriptions of peoples once mysterious to the

modern reader can now be identified and described with confidence due to the illuminating light that Biblical Archaeology has brought.

III. MISSING PLACES IN THE BIBLE AND NOW IN ARCHAEOLOGY

No site was more enigmatic than the Biblical reference to "Ophir," from which Solomon's ships brought such exotic specimens as peacocks, apes, and sandalwood (all of which would suggest a site in India; 1 Kings 10:22-24; 2 Chronicles 9:10-11, 21-22). But even more fascinating was the fact that Solomon's ships "brought back 420 talents of gold" (1 Kings 9:28). That would be equivalent to a whopping sixteen tons, or 14.5 metric tons of gold!

In 1956, at the coastal town of Tell Qasile (just north of Tel Aviv in Israel), a small ostrakon was found with a shipment inscription written on it saying: "gold of Ophir for Beth-Horon, thirty shekels." So, the site of Ophir could now be removed from the scholar's list of so-called legendary sites.

A similar situation arose with regard to the existence of the southern city called Hebron in the Late Bronze Age. Some archaeologists were certain that no Israelite settlements were known in these southern Hebron hills around or before 1200 B.C. However, an Egyptian map from around 1150 to 1175 B.C. showed four cities, numbered 77 to 80, which read: Hebron, Janum, Drbn, and Apheqah, which corresponded remarkably well with the towns Joshua distributed to the tribes in the hill country in Joshua 15:52, which included: "Kiriath Arba (that is Hebron)," "Janim," and Aphekah." Charles R. Krahmalkov commented, "Not only was Hebron in existence [at this time]. It was in a population area, surrounded by precisely those cities given in Joshua 15."³

Even though Numbers 33 seems to be a somewhat dry, routine

listing of sites along the route of the exodus, which a great number of detractors had depicted as unsophisticated, naïve, and generally useless in constructing the route of the exodus, showing the writer knew little or nothing about the situation in the land at this time, Charles Krahmalkov appealed to these same Egyptian maps to show that the names listed in Numbers 33 involved four of the same stations: Iyyin, Dibon, Abel and the Jordan. Again Krahmalkov observed that

“The Israelite invasion route described in Numbers 33:45b-50 was in fact an official, heavily trafficked Egyptian road through the Transjordan in the Late Bronze Age. And the city of Dibon [otherwise unattested except in the Bible and in these Egyptian maps] was in fact a station on that road in the Late Bronze Age.”⁴

IV. MISSING PALACES IN THE BIBLE OR ARCHAEOLOGY

At a small site, about halfway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, Yohanon Aharoni conducted excavations at Ramat Rachel from 1959 to 1962. The site has tentatively been identified as Beth Haccherem, “House of the Vineyard.” It was also assumed (though not listed as such in the Bible) that this was the ancient royal citadel and palace described in Jeremiah 22:13-19 possibly built by King Jehoiachin (608-597 B.C.), son of Josiah.

The remains at this site were nearly totally destroyed in the days of the last kings of Judah, as the Babylonians thoroughly looted and destroyed everything either in 597 B.C., when Jehoachin was taken into Babylonian exile, or during the siege of Jerusalem in 588-586 B.C. However, several proto-Aeolic stone capitals that had once crowned the columns and stone balustrade of the palace’s windows were found. These seemed to bear witness to a type of Phoenician influence in Israelite archaeology.

These windows have below their sills a balustrade in the form of pillars with proto-Aeolic capitals very reminiscent of the motif "the woman in the window," commonly seen in Phoenician ivory inlays. The colonettes and capitals were of limestone and show evidence of red paint. These windows, therefore, may have belonged to the house of Jehoiachin about which, in Jeremiah 22:14, the prophet warned Jehoiachin about thinking more of palace building than he did of God. Jeremiah pointed out that Jehoiachin "cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion [i.e., red paint]." The fragments of these window frames were found in a heap of debris in the northwestern corner of the citadel. Also found were sherds of black and red painted ware with one jar that depicted a king with a curly beard seated on a highly decorated throne in an ornamented robe with short sleeves. Since the sherd gave evidence of being manufactured as local ware, the drawing on the jar probably comes from a local artist, and given the fact that it was found in a royal palace, it is tempting to see this picture as a representation of one of the last kings of Judah, perhaps of King Jehoiachin himself.

Even more fascinating may be the work of Eilat Mazar, which she began in 2005. She has begun excavating south of the temple square in Jerusalem on the spur of the hill where David originally had set up his government over all Israel. Mazar has excavated only some ten percent of a site near the "Stepping Stone Structure," that is so well known in Jerusalem, erected on the rubble of 13th century B.C. Canaanite pre-Davidic remains. But Mazar is fairly certain that what she is excavating is a ten century B.C. palace, which must therefore belong to King David. If she can verify this find, it will be one of the most celebrated discoveries of our times.

Add to this possible verification of David's palace the new excavation by Yossi Garfinkel (Hebrew University) of a

proposed fortified city from the time of David in the Valley of Elat, and things are beginning to warm up for those who adhere to the "New Archaeology." Because of recent disappointments with the debates with the "Minimalists" over the reality of the early story of the Bible, and in an attempt to show their independence of any religious motivations for excavating, this loosely defined school began around the 1970s to move away from focusing on the Bible to a less parochial approach that favored a more scientific basis for their work. In addition, there exists a debate over the archaeology of the time of David that varies a full century between the New Archaeology School and the traditional dating of around 1000 B.C. for finds associated with the period of the Monarchy in Israel.

Thus, what is significant for Garfinkel's work is that the Iron II period is that he is dating what he is finding to around 1000 B.C, whereas the New Archaeology wants to argue that this part of the Iron II did not appear until 900 B.C. According to this lower chronology, there was little, if any, centrally organized society in the days traditionally assigned to David and Solomon (c 1011 to 931 B.C.), which view departs from the way the Bible presented the organization of this period. However, Garfinkel believes he has found a city that has a casemate wall with two gates to the city (a most unusual feature, which may mean this is the site of Sa'arayim, "Double Gates," 1 Sam 17:52) from around 1000 B.C. This find, if substantiated, will once again really upset some of the dominant forces in archaeology today,⁵ for this city exhibits good organization and in the very place where Israelites had not yet taken over.

Conclusions

Biblical Archaeology is far from being declared a dead discipline. Its detractors need to hear the same witty statement that Mark Twain made about the false reports of his death; they were all premature.

In many ways, some of the best years for this discipline are ahead of it, for given the fact that less than two percent of all sites have been touched in the Ancient Near East and many of those that have been accessible or have been opened up have had only a small portion of their tells exposed to patient brush and trowel of archaeologists.

What we really lack from Biblical Archaeology are epigraphic materials from Canaan and Israel, but the prospects for any archaeologist finding a treasure trove of writings or inscriptions in that land are minimal at best. The reason is that the climate is too damp and too wet. Israel receives somewhere in the vicinity of 25 – 40 inches of rain per year, whereas Egypt's delta hardly gets up to ten inches and further south in Egypt it may not even rain at all in a given year or nothing more than a total of one inch. So documents that were put on papyri are very fragile indeed in Israel. In Mesopotamia, they used baked clay tablets, which are almost as durable as stone. But Israel did not use clay tablets nor did it use many stone inscriptions. If anything has survived, it will have to be under special conditions or located in the Dead Sea area, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. But we always keep hoping for a breakthrough, for as valuable as artifacts are, interpretation is best accomplished when we are also simultaneously in possession of written materials.

So, the search goes on. It may be that as we speak another sensational find will be announced that will advance our understanding in ways we could not imagine at this moment. That is the excitement and the thrill of being involved in Biblical archaeology.

by Walter C.Kaiser, Jr

NOTES:

1 G. Ernest Wright, "What Archaeology Can and Cannot

Do,” Biblical Archaeologist 34 (1971): 73

² Transl. John A. Wilson in J. B. Pritchard, ed. Ancient Near Eastern Texts. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1950, pp. 19-20.

³ Charles R. Krahmalkov, “Exodus Itinerary Confirmed by Egyptian Evidence,” Biblical Archaeology Review 20 (1994), p 61.

⁴ Charles R. Krahmalkov, *ibid.* p 58.

⁵ See Hershel Shanks, “Newly Discovered: A Fortified City from King David’s Time,” Biblical Archaeology Review 35.1 (January 2009): 38-43.

Read a biography of Dr. Kaiser here [*“Who is Walter C. Kaiser, Jr?”*](#), *by John Knapp II, PhD*

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