

The stones still cry out!

by Gerald A. Klingbell

How biblical archaeology continues to confirm the historicity of the Bible and broadens our understanding of its meaning.

Dust, yes. Heat, plenty. Heated discussions, couldn't be more. But these are not what makes biblical archaeology exciting and challenging. It is the pursuit of meaning, the comprehending of an entire culture, and letting the Bible come alive that turns the dust of the digging into a castle of understanding. A piece of ceramic, some broken and decayed bones, a portion of a wall, or the defaced inscription on a coin—these and more out of the rubbles of the past cry out, and often confirm the historicity and authenticity of the Scriptures.

The early beginnings of archaeological research were characterized more by reckless adventurers than by cool-headed, analytical scientists.¹ Later this mindset was replaced by careful stratigraphical analysis and a focus upon methods instead of artifacts. This renewed methodological discussion has characterized the work of experts in the field during the past 20 years. One aspect of this debate has been the challenge of William Dever, professor at the University of Arizona, to both the archaeologists and the theologians to redefine the relationship between the faith community and the scientific archaeological community.² As a result, the adjective "biblical" has been dropped from "archaeology" and has been replaced by the geographical marker "Syro-Palestinian." This controversy over "mere names" demonstrates the challenges the discipline faces, rooted more in philosophical presuppositions than in difference of methods. We can observe similar developments in other

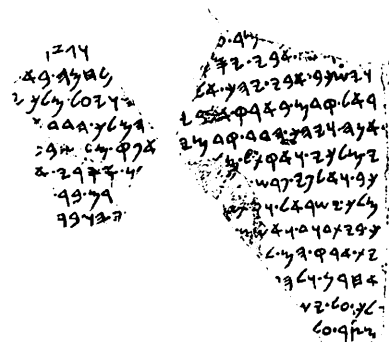
areas of research, perhaps as a result of postmodernism's assault upon the absolute.³

How do these developments affect the Bible-believing Christian reading commentaries, journals, and books that contain references to recent archaeological finds? Is it still true that the spade confirms the Word or is this something for a lesser age, where a positivistic world-view based upon the foundation of creedal Christianity determined the research agenda for biblical archaeology?

To answer these questions, consider three areas in which 21st century biblical archaeology can make a contribution to our understanding of God's Word. Note how biblical text and artifacts need to come together to form a useful whole.⁴

Historical events and personalities

First, archaeology confirms specific historical events and personalities mentioned in the biblical text. A recent example is the Tell Dan inscription.⁵



The Tell Dan inscription.

On July 21, 1993 an excavation team at Tell Dan⁶ discovered an inscribed basalt stone. The find set in motion a great deal of writing by biblical scholars and confirmed the biblical narrative.⁷ The stele (a type of standing stone block with an inscription, often used to mark a border or commemorate an important event in the life of its creators, e.g., a military victory) was part of a wall, dated by the excavator, Prof. A. Biran of Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, to the middle of the ninth century B.C. Thus it would be contemporary with King Ahab of Israel or King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The exciting part of this discovery concerns the content of the stele, which mentions "Israel" and—for the first time in extra-biblical material—"the house of David" which was most probably preceded by a reference to a specific king (in line 9 of this inscription). Some additional fragments found in 1994 suggest that the stele refers to the killing of Jehoram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah by Hazael (see 2 Kings 9). The reference to the "house of David" is clear and beyond discussion. In the Old Testament the "house of David" refers not only to the actual family (or people living under the roof) of King David (1 Samuel 19:11; 20:16), but also to his descendants who sat on the throne in Jerusalem and reigned over Judah (2 Samuel 3:19; 1 Kings 12:19, 20). It seems reasonable to argue that the "house of David" is a reference to the kingdom of Judah and that the mere reference to David—outside the Bible—clears the field of numerous challenges to the historicity of king David.⁸

Daily life in ancient times

Second, archaeology tells us about daily life in ancient times, making our preaching, and teaching of God's Word real and meaningful. That is

one of the reasons why modern excavation teams include a wide variety of specialists in anthropology, biology, palaeozoology/botany, architecture, etc. However, few archaeological findings establish a direct connection with the biblical text. The inscription mentioning a king known from Scripture is the extraordinary event. A seal inscribed with the name of a court official mentioned in the biblical record is the delightful exception. However, the less glamorous (and more dusty side) of archaeology, helping to reconstruct daily life in ancient times, represents a major contribution in our quest for meaning in God's Word.

A good example of this type of research is the work of Øystein S. LaBianca, an anthropologist at Andrews University and one of the co-directors of the Madaba Plains Project, cosponsored by Andrews University, La Sierra University, Walla Walla College, and Canadian University College. LaBianca's main focus has been the study of food systems as a barometer of local social organization.⁹ That research agenda may sound rather dry and irrelevant to the student of the Bible. However, when we start to think about the many times the Bible mentions "eating and drinking"¹⁰ and the importance connected to the communal meal, the significance of water access, land use and settlement patterns and the important role that agriculture in general played in Old Testament times, we immediately realize the significant work undertaken in this area. Here are two examples:

1 Kings 18:41 adds an interesting twist to the story of the encounter between the LORD and Baal (as represented by Elijah and the priests of Baal) when the prophet speaks to king Ahab after the fire has come down from heaven: "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of abundance of rain (NKJV)." Why suggest to the an-

tagonistic king a feast during a drought and after the sad performance of his favored priests? "Eating and drinking" is another building block of the story, anticipating the covenant features of a communal meal. It is another invitation to enter (again) into a covenant with the LORD of Israel (as can be seen in Exodus 24:11 where eating and drinking is part of the covenant ritual). God is not only sovereign to send down fire, but He truly is the one in charge of nature. He will bring rain and with rain come the blessings of a harvest, relief, and renewed vigor. The reference to the meal is both the final declaration of victory over Baal by God's prophet as well as the last-minute effort of a loving Creator God to draw close a wayward and lost child, i.e., king Ahab.

Ruth 1:1 describes a famine in Bethlehem, which ironically means "house of bread." Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons have to find food someplace else and in a desperate attempt to beat the odds (and against good biblical reason) they move to neighboring Moab on the other side of the Jordan valley. The journey does not take long, perhaps a couple of days when traveling with children and the entire household equipment. But in terms of the internal dimension of this decision, the journey can be just as well thousands of miles. The physical famine experience in Bethlehem apparently is avoided in Moab, although the Bible does not describe the material circumstances of the move. However, the spiritual dimension of the famine becomes even more apparent when one reads further in the story of Naomi and Ruth. In a literary time warp Elimelech dies, the two sons die and now there are three widows. Naomi expresses this desolation when she advises her kinfolk on their return

to Bethlehem that she should be called "Mara," which means "bitter," since "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me" (Ruth 1:20, NKJV). The Bible makes two important points: firstly, famines seemed to have occurred locally and not always on a grand scale. A famine could have been caused by a local pest invading the fields of Bethlehem and destroying the entire crop and seed for the next year. A famine destroyed lives, cutting down options, something that can barely be appreciated by a reader of Scripture sitting in the U.S.A. or Europe at the beginning of the 21st century. However, I guess, someone living in sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East can easily connect to this reality. Secondly, the economical interaction between regions can be appreciated in a better way. Israel was not an isolated, protected, island-like enclave. It had (ever-changing) borders, real interaction with close-by regions and with this interaction always came the religious challenge of keeping focused upon Yahweh instead of ever-present fertility deities. Does this change our view of the story of Ruth (or of Elijah and Ahab for that matter)? It helps us to connect real life with Biblical characters. One of the main points that the authors of the Old Testament (and the New Testament as well) made when they described God's acts in history is this: God is an active God, not far removed. He intervenes directly in human history and is in control.

Religious realities

Finally, archaeology helps us to understand religious realities better. In the culture of the Ancient Near East, religion, politics, and daily life were not as well compartmentalized as they are now in our western culture. To illustrate: Consider an important find from Bethsaida (et-Tell), a site



Bethsaida iconic stele.

which Bible readers mostly connect with the ministry of Jesus. However, as recent excavations have demonstrated, the place existed already during the time of the divided monarchy (what archaeologists describe as Iron Age II).

In June 1997 archaeologists from the University of Nebraska, Omaha, found an iconic stele (a stele with an image engraved on it) right next to the entrance of the city gate.¹¹ The stele sat on some type of podium (about 1 meter high) together with a basin and three incense cups. According to the editors of the primary publication, the deity on the stele represents the moon god.¹² The construction definitely had a religious character and I think it provides a good illustration of a frequently overlooked text in 2 Kings 23:8.¹³ The text informs us that when Josiah began what

would be the final religious reform in Judah, "he broke down the shrines at the gates" (New Jerusalem Bible) as part of a list of reform measures which also included the destruction of other high places. As a matter of fact, it is quite surprising that archaeologists have not found many more examples of these gate shrines,¹⁴ because in ancient Israel the gate was one of the focal points of city and society. We are talking of the place where things happened, where decisions were made, and where great reforms started—at the threshold of public society. It is precisely this connection theology and archaeology need to make.

When I was excavating with the Madaba Plains Project in 1996, I spent one unforgettable evening with William Dever, one of the great dons of modern Syro-Palestinian archaeology. We lay in our bunks in a dormitory room, chatting about archaeology, theology, texts, and artifacts, when he told me: "You Adventists do a great job. Keep digging, keep having a broad vision of the connection between real life and the biblical text. Keep reading the Bible in the light of archaeology." And to this I can only add a hearty *Amen*.

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Notes and references:

1. See, for example, the description of the methods of H. A. Layard, who excavated Niniveh, in P. R. S. Moorey, *A Century of Biblical Archaeology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 8, 9. Another good summary can be found in S. Schroer and T. Staubli, *Der Vergangenheit auf der Spur. Ein Jahrhundert*

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- Archäologie im Land der Bibel* (Zürich: Freunde des Schweizer Kinderdorfes Kirjath Jearim in Israel, 1993), p.11.
2. See W. G. Dever, "Retrospects and Prospects in Biblical and Syro-Palestinian Archaeology," *Biblical Archaeologist* (1982) 45:103-107; and "What Remains of the House that Albright Built?" *Biblical Archaeologist* 56 (1993)1: 25-35.
 3. See A. E. McGrath, "The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992) 3: 363; also R. McQuilqin and B. Mullen, "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997) 1:69-82.
 4. For a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between text and artifact see my chapter entitled "Methods and Daily Life in the Ancient Near East: Understanding the Use of Animals in Daily Life in a Multi-Disciplinary Framework" in R. Averbeck et al, eds., *Daily Life in the Ancient Near East* to be published by CDL Press in Bethesda, MD.
 5. For a detailed discussion of the significance of the find of Tell Dan, see my article "La 'casa de David' y la arqueología reciente: o ¿qué viene primero, las piedras o nuestra fe?," *Revista Adventista*, September 1996, pp. 30, 31.
 6. Tell Dan is a city in the Northern Danite territory, modern Tell el-Qadi or Tell Dan, near one of the sources of the Jordan. Its earlier name was Laish (Judges 18:29; called Leshem in Joshua 19:47), appearing as Lus(i) in Egyptian texts of c. 1850-1825 B.C. It was the most Northern Israelite city, hence the phrase "from Dan to Beersheba" (e.g. Judges 20:1). The shrine established here under the priesthood of Moses' grandson Jonathan and his descendants (Judges 18:30) was elevated (along with Bethel) to the status of a national sanctuary by Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12:29f.), and so remained until "the captivity of the land" under Tiglath-pileser III.
 7. See A. Biran and J. Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal* 43(1993)2/3: 81-98, and also their article, "The Tell Dan Inscription: A New Fragment," *Israel Exploration Journal* 45(1995)1:1-18.
 8. See, for example, N. P. Lemche and T. L. Thompson, "Did Biran Kill David? The Bible in the Light of Archaeology," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 64 (1994): 3-22. The article maintains that the biblical account of David (and Saul, Solomon, and all the other historical figures) is not a historical account, telling us about the life and experiences of these men, but rather ideals of Israel which were created by some (very creative and indeed ingenious) scholar some time after the exile.
 9. Ø. S. LaBianca and R. W. Younker, "The Kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom: The Archaeology of Society in Late Bronze/Iron Age Transjordan (ca. 1400-500 BCE)," in T. E. Levy, ed., *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (London and Washington: Leicester University Press, 1995), pp. 399-415.
 10. Compare the important article by A. W. Jenks, "Eating and Drinking in the Old Testament," in D. N. Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:250-254.
 11. M. Bernett and O. Keel, *Mond, Stier und Kult am Stadttor. Die Stele von Betsaida (et-Tell)*, OBO 161 (Fribourg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).
 12. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-41.
 13. Similar constructions and practices are described also in Ezekiel 8:3-5 and perhaps in Psalm 121:8
 14. There are, however, several examples from Tell Dan and other sites in Palestine. See Bernett and Keel, *Mond, Stier und Kult am Stadttor*, 47-66.