

Recent Discoveries in Biblical Archaeology

By Michael G. Hasel

In 1986 I sat spellbound with hundreds of Old Testament scholars at a meeting of the International Organization for the Study of Old Testament in Jerusalem's Israel Museum. Professor Gabriel Barkay was introducing an exciting new discovery made at Ketef Hinnom, a burial site southwest of Jerusalem, where the oldest biblical inscription was found. Two tiny strips of silver, tightly wound and appearing like miniature scrolls had been carefully unrolled. They contained etched inscriptions bearing a shortened version of the priestly blessing (Num 6:24-26). Barkay dated the inscription, based on the archaeological context and style of script, to the late seventh or early sixth centuries BC, 400 years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls. The silence was palpable in the room as many critical scholars, who dated this text in Numbers to the fourth century BC, were suddenly confronted with new evidence. Recent photographic techniques and new computer imaging conclusively dated the amulets to before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BC. This means that they date at least 150 years earlier than critical scholarship has assumed for the origin of Numbers, making the Ketef Hinnom inscription the earliest written biblical passage discovered to date.¹ This was my dramatic introduction to archaeology's power to challenge current interpretations of the Bible.

Since the dawn of archaeological research in the ancient Near East in 1799, no other discipline has provided more new data and insights on the nations, people, and events of the Bible. The scope of archaeology spans the globe and seeks to understand ancient cultures and ways of life through a study of the material remains of the past, impacting both our understanding of origins and ultimately what we have become today. This bridge between who we were and what we have become continues to fascinate thinking individuals around the world with the penetrating questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here?

Discoveries in the nineteenth century have been multiplied many times during the last 150 years of archaeology in the land of the Bible as artifacts, cities, and ancient records reveal the trustworthiness of Scripture.² That thrilling quest for discovery continues into the twenty-first century. In this essay we will review some of the most important finds made during the last 25 years as archaeologists working in the Middle East have contributed greatly to the understanding of the lands of the Bible.

Nations of the Bible

The Philistine cities of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath have been excavated extensively, revealing a sophisticated culture of architecture, art, and technology.³ In 1996 an inscription was uncovered at Ekron revealing a dynastic line of five kings, including Achish, the son of Padi, who ruled over Ekron until the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar. The decorated Aegean-style pottery, the elaborate architecture, and the technology of these cities reveal that the Philistines were the elite in the land of Canaan in the ancient world.

Even in an age of skepticism toward some of the Bible's most famous kings, like David and Solomon, new discoveries call for caution among those who claim that the Biblical record of the kingdom of Judah is mythical in its description of the kingdom's proportion and extent.⁴ New excavations since 2007 at Khirbet Qeiyafa by the Hebrew University and Southern Adventist University have revealed a massively fortified city dating to the time of Saul and David. Surrounded by 200,000 tons of doubly fortified walls, with evidence of city planning, this garrison town situated on the Elah Valley overlooking the area where the famous battle between David and Goliath was fought (1 Sam 17), is a precursor to later Judean cities with similar design elements. In 2009 a second gate was uncovered which now identifies this city with the biblical city of Shaarayim, mentioned in the narrative (1 Sam 17:52).⁵ This has major implications for the early history of Judah and the establishment of the United Monarchy.

People of the Bible

The existence of at least 70 biblical characters, including kings, servants, scribes, and courtiers have been confirmed over the last two centuries of research. In the last two decades many more people have been added to this list through the discovery of seals, seal impressions, ostraca, and monumental inscriptions.

At the site of Tall al-Umeiri in Jordan, Adventist archaeologists uncovered in 1984 a clay seal impression bearing the name “Milkom’ur . . . servant of Baalyasha,”⁶ undoubtedly a reference to Baalis, the king of ancient Ammon, mentioned in Jer 40:14. This obscure king was said to have plotted against the Judean king at the verge of the Babylonian destruction.

In 1993 an inscription was discovered by a student volunteer at excavations in the northernmost biblical city of Dan.⁷ It mentioned for the first time the “house of Israel” and the “house of David,” clearly a reference to Israel’s famous king. David not only existed, but he was remembered over a century later as the founder of a great dynasty.

Archaeologists have excavated Herod the Great’s luxurious palaces at Caesarea Maritima, Herodium, Masada, Jericho and other sites. Herod spared no expense to decorate these buildings with detailed mosaics, frescoes, and architectural elegance. At Masada, Herod’s desert fortress, the northern three-tiered palace had a nearly 360 degree view overlooking the Dead Sea. In 1996 I excavated with Ehud Netzer at Masada where we uncovered an imported fragment of a wine amphora. On the fragment was an inscription: *regi Herodi Iudaico “for Herod, king of Judaea.”* It is the only mention of Herod the Great’s title outside the NT and Josephus and it was found in an archaeological context.⁸

In 2007 a researcher in the British Museum deciphered an inscription of a financial record of a donation made by a Babylonian official named Nebu-sarsekim. The inscription dates to the tenth year of the reign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, about 595 BC (2 Kgs 24:1-4; Dan 1:1; Dan 2:1). Nebu-sarsekim is also mentioned in Jer 39:3 where he appears in the account of Nebuchadnezzar’s second campaign against Jerusalem in 597 BC. In the biblical account over 10,000 captives are taken to Babylon, but Nebuchadnezzar orders Nebu-sarsekim to take care of Jeremiah who is left behind in Jerusalem. This mention of the same person in a financial record of Babylon indicates the importance of continued research in translating thousands of texts discovered in the basements of museums that have never been read or published.

Writing the Events of the Bible

The Dead Sea Scrolls found by a Bedouin shepherd boy in 1947, one of the most amazing discoveries ever, testify to the accuracy of the Bible’s transmission during a thousand years of history. In more recent years questions about the extent of literacy in ancient Israel have been raised. Some scholars question whether Hebrew writing extended back to the tenth century BC, while others go so far as to claim that Hebrew was an invention of the Hellenistic period seven hundred years later.⁹ In the last six years several discoveries have been made that challenge this hypothesis.

In 2005 an ancient stone inscription was found at the site of Tel Zayit excavated by the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. On it an abecedary, an alphabet with 18 letters, was dated by the ceramic and archaeological evidence to the tenth century, the time of Solomon or shortly thereafter. The building in which it was found was destroyed in a massive fire leaving debris nearly one meter thick over the area. Excavators have dated this destruction to Shishak (1 Kgs 14:25-28), or possibly someone else, in 925 BC. The Tel Zayit abecedary is one of the oldest attestations of the Hebrew alphabet. Since it was found in a clear archaeological context that dates it to the tenth century BC the abecedary also provides a distinct connection between the development of language in ancient Israel and the growing archaeological evidence of cities and buildings during the United Monarchy.¹⁰

During the second season of excavation at Khirbet Qeiyafa, a text was found written on a broken piece of pottery (pictured above). The text consisted of five, separated lines and begins with an injunction, “Do not do . . .” The initial phrase is only found in Hebrew and has led Haggai Misgav, the epigrapher, to suggest that the inscription is Hebrew.¹¹ If this is true it would be the oldest Hebrew text ever found – 800 years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls. Unfortunately, much of the rest of the text is incomplete with missing and obscure letters. One suggestion, although highly speculative, is that this text is an injunction for the protection of widows and orphans. As Gary A. Rendsburg has observed, “Taken together, the Tel Zayit abecedary, the Khirbet Qeiyafa inscription and the Gezer calendar demonstrate that writing was well-established in tenth-century Israel—certainly sufficiently so for many of the works later incorporated into the Hebrew Bible to have been composed at this time.”¹² The existence of writing at such an early stage of the Iron Age is significant, because it implies that historical data could have been documented and passed on from the early tenth century BC until the biblical narrative was finally formulated. It also indicates that the charge of a paucity of evidence for ancient Hebrew writing is not as strong as previously thought.

Conclusion

Archaeology remains one of the most significant disciplines in terms of providing new information for the world of the Bible. While some may be tempted to ask: What about this person of the Bible? Why do we not have evidence for that event yet? We need to remember that, although over 200 years have passed since this discipline was established in the ancient Near East, we have still barely scratched the surface. Only a fraction of biblical sites are known. Of those that are, only a fraction have been excavated. Most of those excavated have had only 5% of the site uncovered. Fewer yet are fully published. For these reasons, we need to be cautious in negative assessments of Biblical events and history. One thing is certain, if support for archaeological research continues in this part of the world, the next five or ten years will reveal untold further discoveries to illuminate, illustrate, and in some dramatic cases, directly impact our understanding of the Bible.

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¹G. Barkay, A. G. Vaughn, M. J. Lundberg, and B. Zuckerman, “The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 334 (2004): 41-71; Gabriel Barkay, et al. “The Challenges of Ketef Hinnom: Using Advanced Technologies to Uncover the Earliest Biblical Texts and their Context,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66/4 (2003): 162-71.

²For a general overview, see Al Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998); John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002); Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish, *Lost Treasures of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008).

³For further references, see Michael G. Hasel, “New Discoveries Among the Philistines: Archaeological and Textual Considerations,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9/1-2 (1998): 57-70; Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and Their Material Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1982); Trude Dothan and Moshe Dothan, *People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines* (New York: Macmillan, 1992); Seymour Gitin, “Philistines in the Books of Kings,” in *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception* (ed. André Lemaire and Baruch Halpern; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 308-9.

⁴Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006); and most recently John Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

⁵Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor, and Michael Hasel, “The Contribution of Khirbet Qeiyafa to our Understanding of the Iron Age Period,” *Strata: Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 28 (2010): 39-54; Michael G. Hasel, “Another Battle Over David and Goliath,” *Adventist Review* (February 25, 2010): 18-21; idem., “New Excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa and the Early History of Judah,” in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), forthcoming.

⁶Randall W. Younker, "Israel, Judah, and Ammon and the Motifs on the Baalis Seal from Tell el-'Umeiri," *Biblical Archaeologist* 48 (1985): 173–180.

⁷Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993): 81-98; Fant and Reddish, 103-106.

⁸Michael G. Hasel, "He Missed the Opportunity of His Life," *Adventist Review* (August 9, 2007): 15-17.

⁹See Finkelstein and Silberman, 142; Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (JSOTSup 148; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992).

¹⁰Ron E. Tappy, P. Kyle McCarter, M. J. Lundberg and B. Zuckerman, "An Abecedary of the Tenth Century B.C.E. from the Judaeon Shephelah," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 344 (2006): 5-46; Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter, *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008).

¹¹Haggai Misgav, Yosef Garfinkel, and Saar Ganor, "The Khirbet Qeiyafa Inscription," in *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and its Region* (ed. D. Amit, G. D. Stiebel, and O. Peleg-Barkat; Jerusalem, 111-23), 2009 (Hebrew); idem., "The Ostrakon," in *Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 1. Excavation Report 2007–2008* (ed. Yosef Garfinkel and Saar Ganor; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 243-57.

¹²Gary A. Rendsburg, "Review of Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter (eds), *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan*," *BASOR* 359 (2010): 89.

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