

THE "LAND OF THE BIBLE" EXHIBITION

During the last nine weeks of 1954 an exhibition was held in the British Museum, which had already enjoyed success when it was first shown in Israel in 1952, and which had subsequently been touring the United States and the Netherlands. It was a relatively small exhibition (only about fifty showcases), but its items had been selected and presented with such care that they gave in a simple yet striking way, a clear impression of life and culture in the times of the Bible.

The various archaeological periods were illustrated in chronological order: the prehistoric period with its Mount Carmel skull and its primitive pottery; the Canaanite age with its bronze instruments and some of the Amarna literature; the Israelite age beginning with its simple peasant tools and pottery and ending with the magnificent ivories of Ahab's palace; the Persian period with its imported Mycenaean ware; the Hellenistic period with its numerous symbols of the Maccabean revolution; the Roman period with its *objets d'art* contrasting violently with the coins commemorating the Jewish wars of independence; and the Byzantine period with its beginnings of Christian art and architecture. The exhibition concluded with a few fragments of the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls.

Compared with Egypt or Mesopotamia, Palestine is poor in monumental and plastic art. The relative poverty of the country and the strict prohibition against "graven images" made this inevitable. And yet precisely that poverty makes an exhibition of the culture of Palestine rather more interesting and personal. It is easier to reconstruct the life of ordinary people from a water-flask, an inscribed potsherd, a glass necklace and a sickle than it is from the gigantic sarcophagi, obelisks and colossi in the Egyptian Room upstairs. The Old Testament, which to so many is a dead book about a dead people, came to life in this room, and the ghosts of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Judas Maccabeus and Bar Kokhba took on solid flesh in these showcases. The bronze bit which illustrated the first use of the horse by the Hyksos in the 18th century B.C. gave one much the same sort of thrill as the sword of "black metal" which ripped its way through an Egyptian helmet and announced the Hittite discovery of iron in a recent film. The pathetic repetition, from the first archaeological period down to the last, of the rather crude figurines of fertility goddesses, gave meaning to the repeated appeal of the prophets to return to Yahweh. The poor imitations of contemporary art, whether in the coffin-lid aping the Egyptian sarcophagi, in the struggling alphabet of the Sinaitic

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sphinx, or in the blatantly inferior copies of imported vases, all these emphasised the destiny of this people to be a "people apart", and pointed with even more striking contrast to the dignity and sublimity of the literature they produced.

Grateful thanks are due to the organisers of the Exhibition who showed so much imagination in their choice and disposition of the items, and to the Trustees of the British Museum who made it available to the British public.

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