Recent Biblical Archaeology.


In the excavations which Messrs. G. and A. Horsfield have recently made at Sela-Petra in ancient Edom they succeeded in opening up the tomb of the Triple Dushara, which is a Nabataean complex of three chambers dating from the first century A.D. It was found that the burials in these chambers had been carried out in quicklime, the bodies being entirely calcined in consequence. The discovery affords an excellent commentary on Am 21, where the prophet pronounces a curse on Moab because 'he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime.' This outrage must have taken place at some time when Israel and Edom were allied against Moab (cf. 2 K 36:9), and it was regarded by the prophet as an act of impiety. According to primitive Semitic belief, the human body was so identified with the nephesh or soul that to burn the one was to destroy the other (cf. 2 K 23:16). On the red sand which covered these Dushara tombs being removed, a layer of white quicklime was found; and on this being broken into, only friable calcined bones appeared amid a quantity of black dust, with a second layer of lime underneath. This method of burial, which is employed at the present day in Britain for disposing of the bodies of condemned felons, must have been an ancient Edomite custom going back at least to the time of Amos (c. 760 B.C.), and evidently lingering on among the Nabataeans, many of whom had doubtless married Edomite wives and continued Edomite traditions. It was probably confined to people of rank, such as priests and kings, and must have been unique in antiquity.

We have referred in previous articles to the influence exercised by the Hurrians on the characteristics and early history of the Hebrews. The Hurrians were a Highland race from the Caucasus regions who made a powerful and widespread push southward into the Euphrates district (the Fertile Crescent of the Semites) about 2000 B.C., or perhaps earlier. They settled in large numbers in Mesopotamia, particularly in Nuzi (modern Yorghan Tepe) and Arrapḫa (modern Kirkük), and formed the main population of the Mitanni nation (c. 1400 B.C.) in Aram-Naharaim (Egyptian Naharina), in the region between the Tigris and the Euphrates. They spread westward into Palestine to such an extent that the Egyptians, beginning with the XVIIIth Dynasty (c. 1580 B.C.), regularly called the land Huru, and they are frequently mentioned in the Biblical records under the name Ḥûru (cuneiform Hurru). Discoveries are showing more and more that their influence on the Hebrews, through racial intermixture, social custom, and other circumstances, must have been considerable. Hurrian tablets from Nuzi, numbering about 1100 and dating from about 1475 to 1350 B.C., continue to shed much light on the Patriarchal period and illustrate many an obscure passage in Judges or Samuel.

Professor E. A. Speiser has drawn attention to the fact that the Hurrian dialect helps us to rectify an erroneous phrase in 1 S 18. According to this verse, Hannah, when she went with Samuel to Shiloh, took with her 'three bullocks' (גַּם בָּלָק). The occurrence of the numeral after the noun is unusual in Hebrew, and only one bullock moreover is mentioned in the next verse. Hurrian linguistic usage, however, goes to show that the correct translation should be 'a three-year-old bullock' (גַּם בָּלָק), as in the margin of the Revised Version, and in the Greek and Syriac manuscripts. The copyist, living in later times, has thus divided the Hebrew text wrongly, probably because by his day the use of a number to denote age (as in Gn 15:9, cf. also a cognate use in Ec 4:11, Ezk 42:6) had become somewhat obscure and this Hurrian idiom was unknown to him or did not occur to him. That 'three-year-old' is the correct rendering is evident also from the fact that animals suitable for religious purposes had to be of a certain economic and legal standard. We find from the Hittite Code that the minimum age of bulls in such cases was at least two years, and Hannah's choice of a three-year-old one was thus in harmony with the background of her times as well as with time-honoured tradition (cf. the instruction to Abraham, Gn 15:9).

From the Nuzi tablets we gather that among the Hurrians a man's cloak or outer apparel was supposed to convey with it some charm or efficacy from the owner. Mlle Cassin, in a recent volume on the tablets, quotes several cases of this, where the cloak was identified with his person in some magical or mysterious way, and imbued with his virtues. Probably it is in accordance with such a conception—which was not confined to the Hurrians but was
common throughout the East—that we are to
interpret the reference to the mantle of Elijah
(2 K 2:18) and the robe of Saul (1 S 24:6-11),
and such expressions as 'robe of righteousness,'
'garments of salvation' (Is 6:10), 'of vengeance'
(59:17), etc. We have an example of the same idea
in the case of the afflicted woman who considered
the vesture of Jesus as possessed of mysterious
healing virtue (Lk 8:44). The belief also underlies
the narrative of Ac 19:12, where we read of handker-
chiefs and aprons, which had been brought into
contact with Paul's person, being used to cure the
diseased and to expel demons.

Many scholars are coming to believe that the
Hebrew language embodies numerous Hurrian
words, and that several well-known geographical
and personal names in the Old Testament belong
to this category. Julius Lewy, in a recent description
of Hurrian influences on Israel, has given a long
list of such names. Thus, he traces 'Canaan'
cuneiform Kina-hi, etc.) to a Hurrian word Kina
or Kana meaning a 'reed' (the hi being a common
Hurrian suffix). The 'Land of Canaan' would
thus correspond, he thinks, to the expression
mbdr špm ('desert of reeds') in the Ras Shamra tablets,
i.e. the southern regions from Gaza or thereabouts
as far as the Red Sea ('Sea of Reeds'). He would
trace 'Yahweh' to the ancient Hurrian word Ya
('God'), with the addition of two suffixes (Ya+
ha+wa), while he would regard 'Elohim' as simply
a Semitic translation of this. 'Judah,' he takes to
be the Divine name with suffix -da. Similarly, he
gives a Hurrian origin to such Biblical names as
Sinai, Barzillai, El Shaddai, Talmai, Behemoth,
Leviathan, Moses, Gershom, Miriam, Midian,
Hobab, Jericho, Pharpar, and others. Whether the
derivation suggested in such cases is correct is,
to say the least, rather doubtful, but there can be
no question that the Hurrians exerted an abiding
influence upon the early Hebrews. They are
known to have occupied Aram, with which the
Hebrew race had ancient connexions, and it is not
improbable that large numbers of them were
included in the Hebrew tribes under the leadership
of Moses.

Schaeffer, in his last report on excavations at Ras
Shamra (Ugarit), draws attention to the fact that,
beneath the floors of many of the houses in the
earlier level, there are underground chambers used
for many generations as burial places. This proxi-
imity of the dead to the living was not confined to
Syria, but was common throughout the ancient
world. It was not unknown among the Israelites, but
seems to have been regarded by them as an excep-
tional honour reserved for kings, prophets, and other
outstanding personages (cf. 1 S 25:1, 1 K 2:24, 2 K 21:18,
2 Ch 33:20), though infants, too—not necessarily
those only that were sacrificed—were sometimes
buried below the floors of the rooms in pottery
jars, as we know was done at Jericho. In connexion
with Ras Shamra, H. L. Ginsberg has drawn
attention to the fact that the word kōsharoth
(חָשָׂרָה), which occurs frequently in the tablets
and is supposed to signify 'lunar goddesses,'
probably means 'female singers.' The word
occurs in Ps 68:8, where it is translated 'prosperity'
(Revised Version), but if we accept Ginsberg's
view the correct meaning here would be 'song,'
'music,' or the like ('He bringeth out the prisoners
into song,' i.e. into 'rejoicing').

Reports from Gordon Loud, Field Director of
the excavations at Megiddo, give us many new
revelations of this powerful stronghold, which
commanded the main road through Palestine from
Egypt to Asia, and is referred to so often in the
Old Testament. The site has now been cleared to
bedrock, where the first inhabitants made their
homes, many of them in cave dwellings. A pave-
ment dating from the last half of the fourth mil-
ennium has been found sloping downward toward
the edge of the mound. Upon many of its stones
there are interesting incised drawings of human and
animal forms—a veritable picture gallery of art,
more than five thousand years old. But perhaps
the most important discovery has been the massive
city wall, built probably about 2500 B.C., and made
of colossal masonry suggestive of the one at Ai.
It had an original width of over thirteen feet, which
was subsequently doubled, and when found it was
still standing to a height of eleven and a half feet.
Need we wonder at the report of the spies, 'The cities
are great and walled up to heaven' (Dt 1:28)?

In our last article we described the results of
excavations at Ezion-geber (Tell el-Kheleifeh), from
which Solomon's Tarshish-ships sailed to Ophir.
The question has been discussed as to why the
builders did not choose a site farther west, near
Mrashrash, or farther east as the Nabateans did
at Aila. But Professor Glueck points out that for
several miles on the west no sweet water is obtain-
able for drinking purposes. It is only at Tell el-
Kheleifeh that the wells begin, with a line of them
running eastward not far from the seashore; and
there is no reason to believe that the sub-soil
conditions have changed much since Solomon's day.
As for placing the port farther east, the copper-
refining furnaces, which required a powerful current
of wind, would have missed the prevailing one from
the north, which sweeps down the Arabah at this spot as if driven through a funnel. Among the discoveries at Ezion-geber may be mentioned the numerous stamped jar-handles, twelve of which are marked with seal impressions dating from the seventh or eighth century B.C. The inscription, which is the same on all of them, reads, 'Belonging to Ḫōs-anal, servant of the king.' Ḫōs (or Ḫaus) was the name of the chief Edomite deity, and occurs in numerous theophorous compounds, including some in the Old Testament—cf. Bar-ḵōs ('son of ḵōs,' Ezr 2:53, Neh 7:65) and Ḫushaiah (1 Ch 15:17, where the sibilant is wrong). It seems as if the god Ḫōs was once known in Israel, but if so he must have been eliminated later on as successfully as Hadad. Outside the Bible, the name has been found in Egyptian compounds, notably in Memphis (c. 200–150 B.C.), and in Assyrian transcriptions of the names of some Edomite kings.

There has just been added to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, U.S.A., an amber statuette of Ashur-Nasir-Apal, king of Assyria in the ninth century B.C., which is believed to have been found in the mound of Kalhu beside the Tigris, and which seems to be similar to the stone one of the same king in the British Museum. The importance of the figure lies in the fact that the king is depicted as wearing a gold breastplate almost identical with the one worn by the Biblical high-priest, as described in Ex 28:15–30. We thus have excellent proof that Semitic kings in ancient times regarded themselves as vice-regents of God on earth, and acted as priests or mediators between God and man. The kings of Lagash, for instance, as far back as 2700 B.C., were the only official priests there, and in Abraham's time Jerusalem was ruled by Melchizedek, a priest-king. It was only when a State grew large and became more complex, and the king's duties consequently more numerous and varied, that he delegated some of these, especially the religious ones, to deputies to act in his stead. In this way professional priests arose, though at first they functioned only in the name of the king. By and by, as they increased in number, they formed organized bodies, and ultimately became distinct from royalty. It was different in the case of the Israelites, for among them the priesthood had a special origin, probably of a tribal nature (Levitical). The breastplate, however, worn by its chief functionary, was evidently modelled on that of ancient kings, though it seems to have been larger, for it had four rows of jewels (one more than on the statuette referred to), but in both cases there were three jewels in each row.

The similarity which we have just mentioned is only one of hundreds which show how customs, rites, ceremonies, religious observances, and the like were spread over wide areas. Evidence is continually being discovered of the close relationship between East and West as far back, indeed, as the days of Abraham (c. 2000 B.C.). There were not only commercial transactions over enormous distances, but artistic and other connexions. Mesopotamia transmitted its works of art far westward, beyond the shores of Palestine. At the Palace of Knossos in Crete Sir Arthur Evans has unearthed some bull-shaped libation vessels, a lapis-lazuli cylinder, and other objects of Chaldean pedigree. The diplomatic correspondence found in the archives of Mari on the Euphrates shows that this city was in active communication not only with Ras Shamra (Ugarit), Byblos (Gublā), and Cyprus (Alashia), but with the islands of the Ægean. On the other hand, Crete, as far back as the Middle Minoan Period (eighteenth century B.C.), exported its artistic wares eastward not only to Egypt, but to Palestine, Mesopotamia, and far beyond.

The Ras Shamra discoveries show that Cretan merchants were installed at Ugarit at this early epoch, and Cretan vases, beautifully painted, and various other objects of art, were numerous there. A vase of fine 'egg-shell' fabric, in pure polychrome style, dating from the twentieth century B.C., and clearly the work of some Palace atelier at Knossos, was recently found by Schaeffer in one of the tombs. Ægean architecture, too, was prominent in the construction of many of the burial chambers, particularly those of rectangular shape with dry-stone walls inclined towards the top and roofed with slabs. At Tell Atchana also, on the Middle Orontes, beyond the Amanus range, painted sherds, dating from about 1700 B.C., with decorative motives indicative of a direct Minoan origin, have been found by Sir Leonard Woolley. These and other discoveries point to a flourishing civilization in the age of Abraham, with thriving busy ports on the Syrian coast and round the Mediterranean. At the time when this Patriarch and his Habiru clans were leaving Haran for Canaan, the world, as then known, was closely united in merchandise, art, and other ways. As much was being done by diplomacy as by conquest, and diplomacy in those far-off days was already a fine art. Letters, courteous, tactful, but firm, passed from ruler to ruler over large stretches. Unfortunately, the Biblical records give us no hint of all this, and we have to fill in the background ourselves.