

Archaeology and Ancient Israel

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In this paper, based upon his lecture given at the VI Archaeology Symposium on 16 May, 1981, Dr Millard discusses finds at Ebla, the evidence for the presence of Israel in Canaan, King Solomon's use of gold and the use of writing in ancient Israel.

Anyone who reads a book written in the past can expect some help in understanding it from study of the time when it was written, help that may come from other written works or from material remains of the age. When the book in question belongs to a particularly remote or little known age, the study of its context may also indicate how good a representative of its time it is, and how trustworthy its statements may be. That is to say, something may be revealed about its authenticity and reliability. With the Old Testament help of this sort can come from archaeological discoveries in Palestine and the neighbouring lands, and from written documents of the Old Testament period. The purpose of this paper is to consider four areas of discovery that relate to the history of Israel. Before turning to them, it is important to comment on how difficult the archaeologist may find the identification of the remains he unearths as the product of a specific race or nation. Often cultural boundaries differ considerably from political frontiers, so the claim that a certain type of pot or tool or building is Israelite, or Moabite, or whatever may be, depends on knowledge derived from written sources that a people so named lived in the area where the object was found at the time it was in use.

EBLA

The most outstanding archaeological discovery in the Near East made during the 1970's was the palace of Ebla and its archive. Excavations at the site, now Tell Mardikh about fifty-five kilometres south-west of Aleppo, began in 1964. Not until 1968 did the excavators unearth any written texts, although making valuable archaeological discoveries. In that year they found part of a statue dedicated to a goddess of Ebla. By itself this did not prove the site was Ebla, for a king of Ebla could set up a statue in any city of his realm. The proof came in 1974 and 1975 with the recovery of several thousand cuneiform tablets of a sort found

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in an administrative centre. Their references to Ebla, its rulers, and its affairs, make the identity of the place sure.¹

The tablets lay in the ruins of a fine brick-built palace that had been burnt severely. In the rooms lay scattered objects of precious metal and stone, and the charred remains of richly carved wooden furniture. By their style and decoration these pieces showed very strong influences from Babylonia affecting local craftsmen. The style of these luxury goods and of the local pottery belongs to the third millennium BC, specifically to the period about 2400-2200 BC (that is, shortly after the age of the famous 'Royal Cemetery' of Ur). Two kings who ruled in Babylonia at that time claim to have conquered Ebla: the famous Sargon of Akkad

¹ P. Matthiae, *Ebla. An Empire Re-discovered*, London (1980) gives the authoritative account of the excavations, but the information drawn from the texts is subject to revision.

(c'.2334-2279 BC), and his grandson Naram-Sin (c.2254-2218 BC). Which one may have sacked the palace is not certain, currently Naram-Sin is preferred.

Thus the archives belong to the twenty-third century BC well before the life of Abraham in biblical history. The publicity surrounding their discovery has asserted various links with the Patriarchs which demand attention. Before we can comment on them, we should observe the nature of the documents. The clay tablets were inscribed with a form of the cuneiform script. This writing was at home in Babylonia where scribes had used it for writing the Sumerian language from the fourth millennium BC. At an early stage in its history it was adopted for writing the quite different Semitic language, the result being rather inadequate because the languages did not have identical phonetic stocks (e.g. Sumerian did not distinguish 'q' from 'k' as Semitic languages do, or possess a 'y'). The system spread widely, travelling up the course of the Euphrates to Syria by 3000 BC. In the tablets from Ebla is evidence of continuing Babylonian influence. While there may be many local peculiarities, the scribal tradition is clearly Babylonian. Among the tablets are exercises and reference books which are almost duplicates of texts unearthed in Babylonia proper. Sumerian was an academic study for these scribes, essential to their understanding of the writing system. Most of the tablets are written with liberal use of Sumerian word-signs, but with sufficient words intervening in Semitic to imply the texts were read in a Semitic language. (So in English we write a Latin abbreviation lb (*libra*) with the English plural marker s for 'pounds'). The nature of this Semitic language is disputed. The first scholar to study the Ebla tablets, then epigraphist to the expedition, saw strong links with West Semitic 'Canaanite' languages, such as Ugaritic, ancestral in some way to biblical Hebrew. One scholar has developed this view, attempting to clarify Old Testament passages in the light of texts from Ebla. As other Assyriologists have worked on the tablets, the impression has grown that the Semitic language they present is more closely akin to Akkadian, the Semitic language of northern Babylonia, but

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much more systematic study is necessary before any conclusion is reached. If this second opinion is established, the Semitic language of the tablets may also turn out to be an academic tongue. It may have been the language of written documents but not of ordinary speech, because the names of some men contained in the texts do seem to include West Semitic elements that may reflect popular speech. (They could also point to a different population group.)

Among the tablets are scribal exercises, as noted, letters, at least one treaty and some pieces of literature, but the majority are administrative records. They tell of the kingdom's business, trade with neighbouring cities, incoming revenue and expenditure, and legal transactions. Only when fully edited can their contribution to knowledge be properly assessed. Insofar as these documents are about five hundred years older than any others known from Syria, their importance for the country's history is enormous.

Ebla lies south-west of Aleppo, a long way north of ancient Israel. Nothing known at present suggests there was any direct link between the two areas. In the initial announcements of the archive's discovery, names of Palestinian cities such as Megiddo and Lachish were said to have been identified. Later came reports of Sodom and Gomorrah and the associated cities of Genesis 14. Further study disposes of these proposals. Deepening knowledge of the scribes' practices and the phonetic equivalences between the texts of Ebla and other

ancient Semitic names makes clear these were ill-founded claims. The geographical horizon of the Ebla archive probably extends further east and west than southwards, linking the route along the Euphrates across to the Mediterranean port of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamrah).

With personal names some common ground is more likely. Ancient Semitic names have many similarities wherever they were current. Recovery of records mentioning an Ishmael or a Daniel has not led to identification of those men with the Old Testament characters, they merely exemplify the common nature of the names. The same holds for names at Ebla. Texts name one of the kings of the city Ibrum who has been equated with Abraham's ancestor Eber (Gen. 11:14f.). Nothing links Eber with Ebla, nor are other names in Abraham's family tree found there. The only connection is a possible identity in name.

Some personal names at Ebla are declared to attest the worship there of the God of Israel, anglicized as Jehovah. Beside a name Mika-il appears Mika-ya, just as Hebrew has Michael and Micaiah, the common noun *il/el*, 'god', alternating with the divine name. Other, indubitable, divine names occur in this position, so the *-ya* here at Ebla could be a divine name. On the other hand, there are a number of arguments against the identification, and they are

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sufficiently strong to discredit it. The major one is uncertainty over the syllabic value of the sign read *-ya* which may be *ni*, or *i* as well as *ia*. Even if it is to be read *-ya*, this may not be a divine name but a common short ending like *-y* in Johnny, Bobby in English. No god name *Ya* appears in other contexts at Ebla, although numerous deities are listed.²

If the publicized claims for Ebla's relationship with the Bible are to be discarded, as shown here, what value have the discoveries for Old Testament study? On the linguistic side it is too early to say, but ultimately there will be a major contribution to the early history of the Semitic languages in general, and that may help in understanding the history of Hebrew and Aramaic. In history and culture the overall picture of the 'biblical world' is enlarged. Noteworthy is the free use of writing as a tool of administration, commerce, and diplomacy within the court (no excavation has been done in other buildings of the date at Ebla yet). As work proceeds details of custom and society may emerge that show closer similarities to those of the Old Testament, stressing its ancient context.

After the great palace was destroyed, Ebla continued to be a city of some standing. Early in the second millennium BC its rulers built new fortifications, city-gates, a palace, and temples. The gates and temples are remarkable for correspondences with others of the same date in Palestine, evidence of a common basic culture among the aristocracy of the Middle Bronze Age, the era when the Patriarchs moved through the Levant, according to many historians. Richly furnished tombs have yielded fine gold jewellery illustrating various textual references, including that of the nose-ring with which Eliezer betrothed Rebekah to Isaac (Gen. 24:22).³ The three-room temple plan may be a fore-runner to the temple of Solomon, the proportions, however, being different. Here, again Ebla provides background material for the action of the biblical stories, and emphasizes the sophisticated levels of urban civilization that had been reached before Israel became a nation.

² For the revised assessment of the texts and their relation to the Bible see A. Archi, "The Epigraphic Evidence from Ebla and the Old Testament", *Biblica*, 1979, 60, 556-566.

³ The jewellery is illustrated in *Archaeology*, 1980, 33(2), 15.

EVIDENCE FOR ISRAEL IN CANAAN

The traditions of Israel insist that the nation was devoted to the worship of one God, her God, Jehovah. All trace of the religious ideas and practices of Canaan's earlier inhabitants was to be eradicated as the Israelites occupied their promised land: "Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire" (Dt. 7:15). These directions refer to various concrete elements of Canaanite cults, so the reader can justifiably ask if any examples of them have been found. To give a precise answer, one obstacle has to be overcome, the identification of a physical object with something named in the text. For example, throughout the Holy Land the visitor sees places which

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are alleged to be locations mentioned in the Bible. Yet it is impossible to be certain a particular well is Jacob's, or a house is Peter's. The problem of specific identities extends to objects also: how may one type of altar be distinguished, or how may an object made for religious use be separated from one with a domestic purpose?

Despite these problems, several Canaanite shrines and their furnishings have been unearthed and identified. Excavations at Hazor have supplied two good specimens.⁴ In the larger temple, a tri-partite shrine, lay a stone offering table, various stone-vessels, and an incense altar.

The second shrine found at Hazor was smaller, a single room set into the earthen rampart surrounding the city. Here was a stone statue of a seated male, a stone lion, a flat stone slab perhaps for offerings, and a group of smooth stone slabs set up on end as stelae. There can be little doubt that these stones at Hazor, which were in use in the thirteenth century BC, were the 'pillars' (*massēbōth*) of Old Testament texts which the Israelites were to destroy. One of the Hazor pillars is carved with two hands raised to a crescent and disk, possibly moon and sun symbols. Pillars have been found in various other Canaanite sanctuaries, most notably at Byblos on the coast of Lebanon. In some cases a coat of plaster may have covered the stones and carried painted symbols or writing.

The Hazor shrines and others in Palestine were destroyed towards the end of the Late Bronze Age (c.1300-1150 BC), and not rebuilt. In fact, not one of all the sacred sites of the Late Bronze Age found in ancient Israelite territory so far continued in the same function for long into the Iron Age, the era of Israel's occupancy. This is notable because religious customs are among the most tenacious. Even when religions change, the same sites may remain sacred. Thus the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus occupies the site of a Christian cathedral, and that was built within a Roman temple, parts of which are still visible. Undoubtedly, the Roman temple replaced an older one, perhaps a successor of that house of Rimmon where Naaman's master worshipped (2 Kings 5:18). In Palestine, therefore, there is a marked break in the continuity of sacred sites from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age. A total change in religious activities is the only explanation. That the change was the result of an extensive change in population is a plausible deduction, although a large scale conversion of an existing population to a new religion is also possible. In either case, a change of religious practices is established. Before concluding that this is evidence for the Israelite settlement of Canaan, a warning should be given. Very few sites in the adjacent lands have yielded a continuous

⁴ Yadin, *Hazor* (Schweich Lectures, 1970), London (1972).

sequence of occupation for the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. As the Israelites were taking control

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of Palestine, so the Arameans were setting up their tribal states in Syria. They may have slighted existing cult-centres there, they may have continued them, at present we do not know. Where the Canaanites continued to live, as the Phoenicians, respect for the old shrines did not cease (Byblos on the Phoenician coast and Kition in Cyprus are the best examples). Whether the abandonment of Late Bronze Age shrines was peculiar to Israel or not, the archaeological evidence does seem to accord with the written in a striking way. The ancient text offers the precision the physical remains cannot supply, it was the Israelites who smashed the Canaanite shrines and submerged their religion.⁵

Interestingly, a few Late Bronze Age shrines lingered into the Iron Age, most notable is one at Beth-Shan, the town where Saul's body was displayed. The Old Testament does not hide the fact that some Canaanites continued to live with the Israelites who adopted some of their ways of worship (*cf.* Gideon's father). The majority of Canaan's urban shrines at least were destroyed.

KING SOLOMON'S USE OF GOLD

The temples of Canaan can teach a little about the Temple of Solomon. Its three-room plan is basically the same as the plans of other temples in the Levant, for example at Hazor and Ebla.⁶ Of the Temple itself no trace is known: only the description of 1 Kings 6 and related passages remain to tell of it. In these accounts more is said about the inside of the building than about its external appearance. Put beside information available from the ancient world, they permit a plausible reconstruction to be made. The walls were built of cut stone, perhaps in a style of ashlar masonry that recent study suggest may have originated in Israel in the tenth century BC.⁷ However finely squared the stones, those entering the building would not see them, for the interior was panelled with cedar wood. Naturally the woodwork has decayed, yet the carving that decorated it can be suggested from patterns cut in more durable metal, stone, and ivory by other ancient craftsmen. The palm-tree, flower, and fruit (if that is the meaning of *q^elā'im*) were all in the repertoire of Phoenician artists. Over the cedar-wood, Kings relates, Solomon set gold. How this was done commentators cannot agree. Some allow that the furnishings may have been gilded but not the whole interior, or that details of the carving were picked out with gold, while one has supposed the gold was sprayed on to the walls by means undefined. None of these views is satisfactory in the light of ancient evidence and the biblical text. The first does not treat the text seriously, simply dismissing its claim. Later passages in Kings speak against the second, for they tell of such goldwork being removed by or for foreign conquerors (1 Ki. 14:26; 18:16) while 2 Chronicles 3:9 mentions golden nails in a context which may imply they held gold in position.

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⁵ The information in this section draws upon an unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Liverpool in 1979 by M.J. Fowler.

⁶ C.J. Davey, *Tyndale Bulletin* 1980, 31, 107-146.

⁷ Y. Shiloh, *The Proto-Aeolic Capital* (Qedem 11), Jerusalem (1979).

As for the idea of spraying the gold, no trace of such a technique is to be seen in the ancient world. The stumbling-block in reading about Solomon's lavish building and interior decorating projects lies in the incredulity of the modern mind! Faced with the biblical text alone, the reader may be forgiven for treating the narrative as part fantasy on the level of the Arabian Nights, or at best legendary exaggeration. Throughout this century, however, details have accumulated about other ancient kings and the temples they built. Solomon's Temple is not an isolated example. Assyrian and Babylonian kings boast of shrines they built and how they plated their walls with gold 'like plaster', so that they 'shone like the sun'. Their buildings do not survive, only descriptions, as for Solomon's Temple, with less detail. From Egypt, renowned in antiquity for her wealth in gold, there are similar descriptions. One case is of especial value because much of the structure still stands. At Karnak, Tuthmosis II erected a great temple, for the Sacred Boat of the god Amun, about 1450 BC. The king boasts of the treasure he lavished on the temple, plating its columns with gold. Some of the pillars still stand, carved like stems of papyrus reed. In the stonework are narrow slits which have no architectural or decorative function. A French Egyptologist has probably found their correct explanation: they were cut to hold the edges of gold sheets hammered over the surface of the stone and folded round to keep in position. Small wedges or battens may have kept the sheets tight. These pillars are 3.24 metres (10½ feet) high, and there were twelve of them. In another hall stood fourteen others, towering 16.25 metres (53 feet) above the ground. Gold sheathed these, too, so that the visitor would look down a hall of golden columns. Carved stone slabs at doorways were covered with gold, the carving beaten in the metal. None of this precious decoration exists today, but on some of the stones can still be seen the rows of holes drilled to take the nails that held the gold in place.

Here, without direct contact between the Old Testament, ancient Israel, and the texts and objects from neighbouring lands, one of the most famous achievements of the Israelite monarchy becomes more intelligible and more credible. The biblical claims for the existence of a fine Temple in Jerusalem founded in the tenth century BC, adorned with gold, is beyond external proof. On one hand, the possibility that the account is a fabrication from a much later date cannot be completely disallowed. On the other hand, the ancient evidence shows the account is plausible, and is in keeping with the practices of the age, and, unless a remarkable discovery is made in Jerusalem, that is as near to the facts of the matter as we can come.⁸

WRITING IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

The fourth field of discovery to be noticed is that of ancient Hebrew documents. When the Israelites settled in the territory of

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Canaan they occupied towns where alphabetic writing had been current for several centuries. Egyptian scribal practices had influenced the choice of writing material, papyrus. Unless conditions are very unusual, as in the Egyptian desert or the Dead Sea caves, buried or discarded papyrus perishes, so we are deprived of any ancient Hebrew writing on a large scale. This means no books survive, nor any legal or administrative records of length or importance. Those that are available are short messages, notes, and accounts scribbled on

⁸ See my forthcoming study, *King Solomon's Gold*, and 'Solomon in all his glory', *Vox Evangelica* 1981. [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol12/worship-of-jesus_france.pdf].

potsherds, the scrap-paper of ancient ink-using scribes. To date about 250 have been recovered, many illegible. There are major groups from the Israelite royal palace at Samaria (c.750 BC 102 pieces), from the gateway and elsewhere at Lachish in Judah (c.587 BC; 22 pieces), and from the fort at Arad near the southern end of the Dead Sea (8th and 7th centuries BC; 88 pieces). Smaller numbers or single pieces have been found at many other towns throughout Israel and Judah. There are also a number of similar records scratched on potsherds. The earliest of these is one which, if it is actually Hebrew, may be a school boy's exercise. It is a curious series of letters of the alphabet which was unearthed at Isbet Sarte, near Aphek, dated about 1100 BC. Another, of the 8th century, has become well-known for its reference to 'gold of Ophir'. Scattered as widely as the ostraca are pieces of pottery vessels on which personal names are scratched, proclaiming "X owns this". Occasionally names of dead persons were scratched or chalked on the walls of tombs, and one list of men was painted on the wall of a cave near the Dead Sea.

Such inscriptions, lying in the ruins of major towns and of minor ones, of local military garrisons, and of frontier posts attest a wide knowledge and use of writing. The names on pots and pans surely imply their owners could distinguish one name from another.

More carefully made inscriptions, prepared for display, or as permanent monuments, are very rare. There are a few from ostentatious tombs in Siloam, the famous Siloam Tunnel Inscription, fragments on stone blocks from Samaria and Jerusalem, and another on an ivory plaque taken as booty to Assyria.

Two kinds of document show writing in the service of authority. Numerous stone weights of the 7th century BC, found in Judah, carry words or signs denominating them as multiples or fractions of the shekel. These point to a measure of control or convention in trade practices during the last century of Judah's existence. Control also appears in the hundreds of examples of jar handles of the same period, each impressed with a stamp bearing the word 'royal' (*lammelech*). Beneath the word each stamp has a scarab beetle or another device, and the name of one of four towns, Hebron, Memshat, Sokoh, or Ziph. Explanations of these marks vary; my preference is for their presence as a guarantee of the jars' capacity.

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The jar handle stamps introduce the final category in this summary of ancient Hebrew written documents, personal seals. Scores of small stones, polished and cut with their owners' names in Hebrew letters, have entered public and private collections through the past hundred years. Definite Hebrew names are obvious when they contain the name of the God of Israel as an element, as in Jehonathan. Neighbouring peoples had similar names, with their own gods in the corresponding position, such as Phoenician Ba'al-yaton or Moabite Chemosh-natan. Names familiar from the Old Testament occur, others enlarge our knowledge of the Hebrew onomasticon, joining newly known names from some of the ostraca. These names stress the place of the national God as supreme, even if, as the Old Testament prophets and a few inscriptions make clear, some ancient Israelites worshipped Asherah as his consort. (The clearest evidence for Asherah is an inscription painted on a jar during the eighth century BC. The jar was found in a small ruined fort, now called Kuntillet Ajrud, 50 km south of Kadash-barnea.) No ancient Hebrew names with Asherah as an element have been identified.

The seals vary in quality from the magnificent one engraved with a lion for Shema, an officer of Jeroboam II of Israel (c.782- 753 BC) to crudely incised ones that were, presumably, for

less well-to-do citizens. Apart from a few men titled 'son of the king' or 'servant of the king', the rank of most seal owners is unknown. We can assume they were people holding military or administrative office, or land-owners, or businessmen. A small number of seals belonged to women, often described as 'daughter' or 'wife' of a man. Presumably these were women of substance, like Abigail.

These seals contribute to our appreciation of writing in ancient Israel in another way. The majority are small, one or two centimetres in length, with no decoration except the tiny engraved letters. Impressed on clay to seal packages or authenticate documents they would demand familiarity with letters if they were to be recognised. Their impressive number, currently between two and three hundred, is testimony to a wide distribution of people who could read in ancient Israel. Taken with the references to writing in the Old Testament and the other inscriptions mentioned they give powerful testimony to a greater use of writing in ancient Israel than scholars have usually supposed. With writing readily available, it would be surprising to learn that the words of the prophets were transmitted orally alone for decades or generations. There are implications here for the accuracy and reliability of transmission which deserve further study.⁹

Through the examples presented here we see archaeology giving background information about the world of the Old Testament and its culture. Ebla reveals the high levels reached in a Syrian city before and during the patriarchal era. A range of discoveries about shrines in Late Bronze Age Canaan apparently witnesses to a

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major religious change at the end of that epoch, the time when many scholars believe the Israelites occupied their Promised Land. With King Solomon's gold, an inquiry into ancient practices enable us to treat as plausible a biblical account that has been widely discredited. Finally, ancient Hebrew inscriptions give details about personal names, society, and administration, reveal at first-hand what early Hebrew writing was like, and allow a re-assessment of the role of writing in the history of Old Testament books.

Our choice has been deliberate. These are examples of archaeology interacting with the Old Testament, itself an ancient book. They do not prove anything about the Old Testament. They give circumstantial evidence that agrees with the Scriptural text, they provide some of the context for the Old Testament. The books and the material remains need to be studied together, for each can throw light on the other. Sometimes the data may be ambiguous or inadequate, or the textual interpretation wrong. Treated carefully and objectively, archaeology can offer valuable help to the serious reader of the Old Testament.

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Prepared for the Web in March 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁹ On early Hebrew writing and its value, see my essays, "The Practice of Writing in Ancient Israel", *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 1972, 35, 98-111, and "In Praise of Ancient Scribes", *ibid.* 1982, 45, and N. Avigad, "Hebrew Epigraphic Sources" in A. Malamat, ed. *The World History of the Jewish People* I, 5, Jerusalem (1979).