

The Bible BC

What can archaeology prove?

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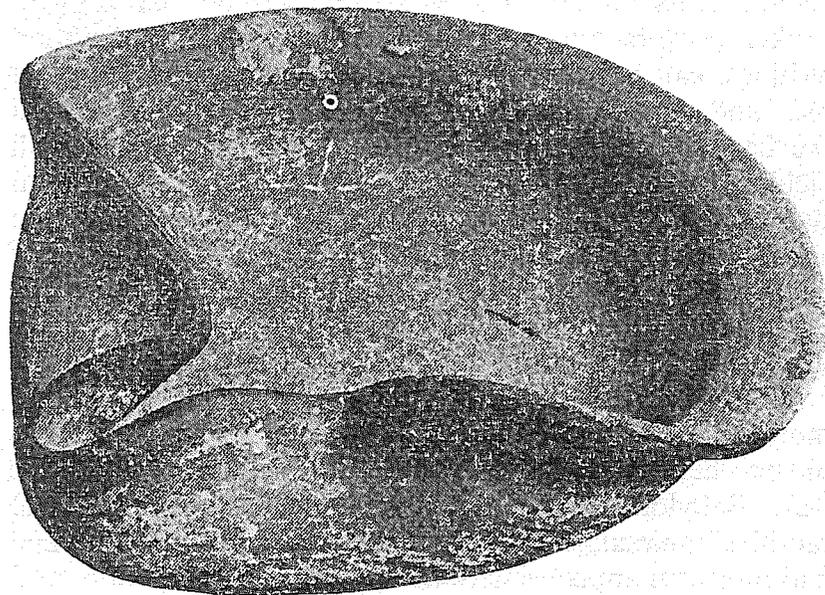
Archaeology and the people of the Bible

One of the most instructive aspects of near eastern archaeology is its revelation of human life. Preoccupation with broken pots, incomplete plans of ruins, or half-understood writings, can hide the fact that these were the products of men and women like us. A few moments' thought about the basic tools of living which we take for granted will yield a list in which many items can be traced back to Babylonia or the Levant. Pre-eminent are the wheel and the art of writing, especially of alphabetical writing. The circle of 360 degrees and the hour of 60 minutes are owed to the Sumerian and Babylonian astronomers, and to them, too, is due the dubious honour of founding astrology.

Concern for the future took a lot of ancient energy (and money, too, no doubt), as men were anxious for their crops or their herds, the recovery of the sick or the winning of the war. Babylonian soothsayers inspected the entrails of sacrificed animals; in schools clay models of livers marked and inscribed appropriately were kept for consultation, and vast collections of omens drawn from every corner of life were arranged in encyclopaedias. This lore was exported with other fields of Babylonian learning to the Hittites in Turkey and the Canaanites in the Levant. There it was one of the 'abominations' Israelites were to avoid, for their God was the Almighty who controlled the universe. Men of old had a fear of the unknown far sharper than we know, because disease, famine, and attacks by wild animals and

raiders were frequent and unavoidable. Omens might help some; others relied on charms, clay or metal figures of gods or demons which the poorest could afford and which emerge in most excavations from private houses and from shrines at all periods. Whereas there is little trace of Israelites continuing to worship at Canaanite sanctuaries after their occupation of the promised land, manufacture of clay amuletic figures did not cease. They are probably the products of popular superstition amongst the Israelites.

Pottery fashions tell the archaeologist more than the date of the level he is clearing. A community where pottery enters every sphere of life wants well-finished, decorative wares,



Pottery lamp of the period of Elisha, from southern Palestine.

while a community which employs metal vessels takes less interest in its earthenware; and where metal vessels are expensive they will be copied in clay. Technical advances in faster potters' wheels or baking to a higher temperature leave their marks on the ceramics. Pottery lamps of a ninth-century Israelite type illustrate the story of Elisha and the

Shunammite woman who provided one for the prophet's room (2 Kings 4:10). Dishes, jugs, and cooking-pots from the simple mud-brick houses help us to gauge the standard of living.

Amulets and pots and pans, gold rings and copper pins bring us nearer to the men and women of those days. Individuals are known to us when they have personal documents. A number of ancient Israelites gain some substance through the recovery of their seal-stones. Growing familiarity with the alphabet brought wide use of seals carrying no design but the owner's name and surname,



Hebrew seals of the seventh century BC. right: seal of Nehemiah, son of Micaiah, engraved on rock crystal; Left: seal of Abigail, wife of Asaiah, engraved on cornelian, 14 x 11 mm.



almost meaningless to an illiterate. The stones are normally less than an inch long, so the engraved letters are minute. About 250 Hebrew seal-stones from the period 750-580 BC have been catalogued, indicating a large body of officials and other men and women who could recognize their own names. Seals were impressed on lumps of clay to fasten boxes and bags, and to seal documents (*cf.* Jeremiah 32:9ff.). The clay sealings survive on occasion with marks of the papyrus fibres on the backs, left by long-perished letters and deeds.