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ARCHAEOLOGY UNCOVERS NEW UNDERSTANDING of the Old Testament

By Carrie McWhorter
for Word&Way

For the past ten summers, archaeological teams have worked at the site of the ancient city of Gezer, located on the western slopes of the Judean Hills midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Delicately removing layer after layer of soil from the roughly 30-acre site, these teams of archaeologists, seminary students, and dedicated volunteers have uncovered the walls of what Bible scholars believe was a strategically important city.

The excavation of Gezer is a good example of how archaeology can help us better understand Old Testament history and culture, says Steven Ortiz, professor of archaeology and biblical backgrounds at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and director of the

seminary's Charles D. Tandy Institute for Archaeology.

"Archaeology is a discipline that helps us see the Bible in 3D," he said.

That is certainly true at the Gezer site. The city of Gezer is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. Horam, king of Gezer, was defeated by Joshua (Joshua 10:33). The Israelites took the city, but later verses tell us that the Canaanites "persisted in living among the Israelites," often in servitude (Joshua 17:13 and Judges 1:29). Later in the Old Testament, in nearly identical accounts, 2 Samuel 5 and 1 Chronicles 14 tell us the Philistines were angered when they heard that David had been anointed king over Israel and went to find him. God affirms to David that he will deliver the Philistines into David's hands,

so "David did as the LORD commanded him, and struck down the Philistines from Geba [Gibeon] to Gezer" (2 Sam. 5:25).

In 1 Kings 9, we learn that Gezer was captured by the Egyptians. The Pharaoh killed the Canaanites who lived in the city, burned the city and gave the city as dowry when one of his daughters married Solomon. In 1 Kings 9:15, it lists Gezer as one of the places Solomon undertook to rebuild around the time he also began to rebuild the temple.

The excavations at Gezer have put the biblical text into context with the historical site, says Stephen J. Andrews, professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

"It's kind of amazing what they've

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary archaeologists unearthed remains of three humans this summer in the biblical city of Gezer. (Baptist Press)

“ Archaeology is a discipline that helps us see the Bible in 3D.

—Steven Ortiz



Members of a New Orleans Seminary archaeology team clear dirt and debris from storage rooms near the Bronze Age wall at the Gezer dig. (Michelle Seal/Baptist Press)



Steven Ortiz

found,” Andrews said. “Bodies killed in a fiery destruction. A whole layer of Egyptian cultural remains. Prior to this, little archaeological remains from an Egyptian context or culture were known, and they found a lot of these materials. These cultural remains give credibility to the biblical account.”

Another site of interest is the synagogue at Huqoq, an ancient Jewish village located approximately three miles west of Capernaum and Migdal (Magdala) in the region of Galilee. Mosaics uncovered at the site in 2012 and 2013 depict scenes of Samson, the first ever artwork depicting Samson found in a synagogue in Israel.

Excavated by archaeologist Jodi Magness, senior endowed chair in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and first vice-president of the Archaeological Institute of America, and Shua Kisilevitz, an archaeologist with the Israel Antiquities Authority, the mosaics date to the 5th Century. But the depictions potentially shed light on later understanding of Samson’s significance in the messianic longings of Jewish religious communities.

“Depictions of Samson wreaking havoc among the Philistines easily could have had contemporary social, political and religious significance,” Magness writes. “A biblical warrior who was born ‘to deliver Israel’ (Judges 13:5) and who fought against an occupying force may have resonated with Galilean Jews who saw themselves as being under foreign occupation and who anxiously awaited their own deliverance.”

Though Samson’s redemption of his people was temporary, his story “demonstrated that God could save Israel from its oppressive enemies, just as many Jews in Byzantine Galilee hoped the messiah would do in their own lifetime,” Magness wrote in a 2013 article for the journal *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*.

Andrews said fall is always an exciting

time for biblical scholars interested in the insight archaeology provides into Old Testament times.

“In the fall, we hear new things being talked about after the summer digs,” he said. “Thanks to archaeology, we are able to understand a little more about the geography and culture of these sites that are mentioned in the Bible.”

That is not to say that all the headlines that come out of these digs are believable, Andrews warned.

“Sometimes the news is sensationalized, which is why it’s important to look at the actual field reports, not the media reports,” he said.

Still, he says archeology is the one discipline in the academic realm that is producing new insight for biblical scholars to study. Archaeological field reports add to our understanding of the types of people who lived at particular sites and how they lived. Architectural and cultural artifacts, such as pots, pans and everyday living utensils, provide insight into the culture of the day.

Andrews distinguishes between Syro-Palestinian archaeology, which he calls “getting down in the dirt,” and biblical archaeology.

“It’s not that we go to the Holy Land with a Bible in our hand,” Andrews said. “Instead, we look at what’s coming out of exploration and how that might intersect with biblical materials. Archaeology comes into the biblical world to illustrate and illuminate and sometimes confirm what the Bible says about the events and sites.”

Putting archaeology into its proper perspective is important, writes Kenneth Gardoski, associate professor of systematic theology at Clarks Summit University (formerly Baptist Bible Seminary) in Clarks Summit, Penn., in “The Usefulness of Archaeology for Apologetics.”

“While archaeology cannot prove the Bible is the Word of God, it can and does perform a powerful and compelling work,” he explained. “Archaeology has

proven many times over that when the Bible records history — various peoples, the places they lived and the events in which they took part — it speaks the truth. These people really lived. These places really existed. These events really occurred. This is important because the history and theology of Scripture are intertwined and inseparable. The theological truth claims of Scripture cannot be validated empirically, but the historical claims can be and have been many times through archaeology.”

Ortiz also notes that archaeological projects like the one at Gezer, which wrapped up in summer 2017, are valuable because of their evangelical foundation, noting Tandy Institute field projects ongoing in Israel, Cyprus, Egypt and Kazakhstan. The fact that the projects are open to people with an interest in archaeology, not just students, is also significant.

“Most excavations are open to lay people, but this is not just a tourist trip,” he explained. “Participants are helping with research — being in the Holy Land, working on a dig and seeing history come alive. It’s a great opportunity to be involved in science and exploration.”

Carrie Brown McWhorter writes for several publications, including The Alabama Baptist newspaper and Missions Mosaic magazine. Find her on Facebook @McWhorterMedia or visit her website, carriebrownmcwhorter.com.



carrieMcWhorter

DNA

Rereading the Old Testament with Modern Research

By Carrie McWhorter
for Word&Way

In 2001, the first draft of the human genome was published in the journal *Nature*. The research effort sought to identify all the genes in human DNA and to determine the possible sequences of the chemical bases that make up human DNA. Francis Collins, a physician, geneticist and Christian who now serves as the director of the National Institutes of Health, led the project, which he described as “a narrative of the journey of our species through time.”

The completion of the Human Genome Project raised a significant question in Christian circles: Who are Adam and Eve in light of the conclusions?

“The results of the Genome project suggest that a set of ten thousand people started the human race, which challenges the literal interpretation of Adam and Eve in Genesis,” said Bing Bayer, professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo.

In their recently published book, “Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science,” evangelical geneticist Dennis Venema and New Testament scholar Scot McKnight explore questions pertaining to evolution, genomic science and the historical Adam, arguing that genome research and Scripture are not irreconcilable. Scientific research, as well as research in the arts and humanities, regularly casts new light on ancient life and culture. As a result, biblical scholars and lay people alike must grapple with the implications of the research on their understanding of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament.

“When we read the biblical text, we must realize it’s really a Middle Eastern document,” says Steven Ortiz, professor of archaeology and biblical backgrounds at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. “The Bible was written in the soil of ancient Palestine. God revealed himself to a particular people. Critics and fundamentalists alike come to the biblical text and want a word-for-word analysis, but history doesn’t work that way. I think there’s a lot of confirmation, but there’s seldom direct one-to-one correspondence.”

As Venema and McKnight make clear, Old Testament inquiry often requires asking questions. The answers may require a willingness to accept different possibilities.

Take for instance the story of the Golden Calf fashioned by the people of Israel while Moses was on the mountain receiving the

Ten Commandments. In her 2014 article “Metallurgy in the Bible,” published in *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, chemist Susan Meschel, adjunct professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, argues that the method of fashioning the calf is less interesting scientifically than what the Bible says about the destruction of the calf.

Passages in both Exodus and Deuteronomy say Moses burned the calf, ground it to powder, threw the dust in the brook and made the Israelites drink it (Ex. 32:20, Deut. 9:21). Problem number one from a scientific view is the reference to “burning” the gold as opposed to the normal process of melting metal. A second question is how the burned metal could be ground into dust. A third issue is gold powder would have quickly sunk in the water before the Israelites could drink it.

Certainly, a miraculous work in the burning and drinking of the dust is possible, a literal reader might argue. However, David Frankel, senior lecturer in Bible at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, suggests a wording rearrangement might be in order. Frankel “hypothesizes that an ancient editorial or copyist’s error occurred and suggests reversing the two parts of Ex 32:19-20 as follows: ‘He became enraged and hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain; then he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it,’ followed by ‘He took the calf that they had made and burned it.’”

“In this reading of the text, it is not the gold that is pulverized and scattered over the water but the tablets,” Meschel writes. “Assuming that the tablets were of limestone or marble, the process is technically quite reasonable. Limestone can be broken and powdered without the use of any sophisticated equipment. Such powder would mix with the water and could float on it, since its density is not high.”

Meschel’s exploration of metalworking in the Old Testament also suggests that craftsman skilled in metal working would have been valuable members of ancient societies like the Israelites of the Old Testament. She notes that early books of the Bible deal with manufacturing objects from silver, gold and copper, which are metals with relatively low melting points. In contrast, iron would have been harder to work with because it has a higher melting point. Therefore, to fashion implements from iron would require hotter

furnaces and possibly the use of forced air to increase the temperature.

1 Samuel 13:19 states that “no smith was to be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines were afraid that the Hebrews would make swords or spears. So all the Israelites had to go down to the Philistines to have their plowshares, their mattocks, axes and colters sharpened.” As a result, on the day of the battle, “no sword or spear was to be found in the possession of any of the troops with Saul and Jonathan; only Saul and Jonathan had them.” Later kings, including Uzziah of Judah, provided shields, spears, helmets and coats of mail (2 Chronicles 26:14), but Scripture does not say who provided them.

The value of ironsmiths is also evident in 2 Kings, which notes that Nebuchadnezzar “deported thousands of skilled workers: He exiled all of Jerusalem, all the commanders and all the warriors — ten thousand exiles — as well as all the smiths and artisans” (2 Kings 24:14). Eventually, Isaiah tells us there were skilled Hebrew ironsmiths (Isa. 4:7 and 44:12), which meant the Israelites no longer had to outsource their tools and weapons — a useful development to be sure.

Perhaps the biggest question regarding the Old Testament among evangelicals today is how the Old Testament relates to Christ, says Stephen J. Andrews, professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. Some Old Testament scholars have begun referring to the Old Testament as the “Hebrew Bible,” sometimes used as justification to ignore how the Old Testament speaks about Christ, he said.

At the other extreme, is the “Christocentric” approach, which involves looking for Christ in every passage of the Old Testament and opens the door to “fanciful interpretations on every page,” Andrews said.

A better way, he suggests, is not to hold the Old Testament at arm’s length but rather to follow Paul’s advice that all of the Old Testament—law, history, poetry and wisdom and prophets—are to be examples to us.

“We confess this is the Bible, so the question is: How can the church find the Christian Scripture here? How does the Old Testament tell us about God’s will, God’s nature, God’s purpose? How do we go back and find Christ, the Messiah, and how do we approach the Old Testament with the power of the Holy Spirit?” Andrews asks. “It does matter.” ◀◀