Syro-Palestinian Archeology, History, and Biblical Studies

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During the last decade, changes have been taking place within Syro-Palestinian archeology and in the relationship between Syro-Palestinian archeology and biblical studies. While in the past the two disciplines have often been combined in the concept of "Biblical Archeology," today they are becoming more and more independent as primary fields of research. From the viewpoint of Syro-Palestinian archeology, it is clear that biblical studies relate to only a small portion of the overall history of Syria-Palestine. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of biblical studies, the archeological evidence represents only one aspect of the complex data that biblical scholars must evaluate critically. Thus, although the two fields are becoming more and more specialized, there is an overlap of research in certain periods, and a proper relationship must exist between them for those periods.

Syro-Palestinian Archeology

Today extensive archeological work is being conducted throughout the Syro-Palestinian area, in the modern states of Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Although this has always been the case to a certain extent, the level of activity in Jordan and Syria in particular has increased dramatically during the last decade. In addition, for the first time, major surveys and some excavations are underway in the Arabian peninsula and along its coasts. This activity brings Arabia more fully into the Near Eastern picture, alongside such well-established archeological regions as Egypt, Cyprus, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. International scholars are at work in each of these countries, but growing numbers of local scholars are also now carrying out research projects through their own universities and Departments of Antiquities. Vast amounts of new archeological data are coming from these areas, and those data must be integrated across modern political boundaries. Theories and reconstructions based on the evidence from one region alone, which in the context of biblical studies has usually been Israel, must be tested in nearby regions, especially in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. It is thus clear that during the last decade the focus of archeological work has been broadened geographically, not only within Syria-Palestine, but also within the Near East as a whole.

Archeology today is also dealing with the entire history of man in the Near East, from the earliest prehistoric times to the modern day. Specialists are now working on the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Chalcolithic periods, from at least as early as 500,000 B.C. to ca. 3300 B.C.; on the Bronze-Iron Ages, ca. 3300–332 B.C.; on the classical Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods, ca. 332 B.C.–A.D. 640; and on the Islamic periods, ca. A.D. 630–1918ff. Although some work has always been done in each of these periods, many of them have often been ignored, neglected, or even discarded for the sake of other periods. In the context of biblical studies, the Bronze-Iron Ages have most frequently been studied in isolation, to the detriment of both earlier and later periods. It is now an almost universally accepted principle that archeological evidence from all periods must be treated with equal care. This understanding reflects the growing consciousness of all researchers, both international and local, that the evidence from each period represents only one part of the long archeological history of the Near East. Thus, chronologically, the focus of archeological research in Syria-
Palestine has also been broadened greatly.

Strategies for obtaining archeological evidence have also been changing during the last decade. Regional surveys, soundings and excavations at one-period sites, and major excavations at complex tells are all taking place, each with new dimensions in method.

During the last decade, numerous regional surveys have been carried out in Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. In Jordan, the new surveys have shown that only 5–40% of the archeological sites are known from previous survey work. Thus, reconstructions of settlement patterns based on the previous work need thorough reinvestigation. For example, the oft-quoted statement that the Middle-Late Bronze Ages are weakly attested in central and southern Jordan has been shown to be untrue in central Jordan, but it has yet to be tested fully in southern Jordan. In addition, the more recent conclusion, based on the excavations at Umm el-Biyarah, Tawilan, and Buseira, that there is no evidence for settled occupation in Edom before ca. 800 B.C., has been shown to be untrue in central Jordan, but it has yet to be tested fully in southern Jordan. In addition, the more recent conclusion, based on the excavations at Umm el-Biyarah, Tawilan, and Buseira, that there is no evidence for settled occupation in Edom before ca. 800 B.C., has been shown to be untrue by the many Iron IA [ca. 1200 B.C.] sites found in a recent survey to the south of the Wadi Hesa.

Survey methods have improved greatly in recent years, and they have become far more sophisticated than older approaches. Systematic surface investigation for sites of all periods and quantification of data (such as grid locations of sites, sizes of sites, and artifactual evidence for periods at sites) are methods that have made it possible to determine site relationships and regional settlement patterns with more precision. Ideally, such surveys should have interdisciplinary staffs, including prehistorians. Although many large-scale surveys have been carried out, most areas of Jordan and other countries remain to be investigated, and many such projects can be expected in the future. Survey projects still represent the most economical form of archeological fieldwork in terms of the amount of data obtained in comparison to the cost involved.

The advantages of excavating at smaller one-period or several-period sites have become clear during the last decade. In the past, most excavation projects were attracted to the large and impressive tells in Syria-Palestine. These tells were often so large that only a very small percentage of the site, often less than 1%, could be excavated by modern techniques, and thus only very small exposures of each occupational phase could be obtained in deep trenches or squares. In addition, many of these large tells had suffered so much complex restructuring of the site in each successive period that damage to the preceding layers by pitting, robbing, and leveling left little intact of each layer. In Jordan, the extreme of such ancient restructuring has been encountered at major sites which were repeatedly scraped off to bedrock during their long history (e.g., Tell Hesban and the Amman Citadel). At small sites, with shorter occupational histories, more of the original occupational evidence is left intact, undamaged by numerous subsequent occupations. A much greater percentage of such a site can be excavated, as it is smaller to begin with and more horizontal exposure is thus possible. More thorough sampling of the data for the period(s) represented is also possible. Sites can also be selected to represent certain periods, in order to solve particular stratigraphic or chronological problems (e.g., Early Bronze IV-Middle Bronze). Such small sites need to be studied in any
The excavation at Tell Mardikh, Syria, site of ancient Ebla. Until the discovery of Ebla, many scholars regarded ancient Syria as a cultural backwater, a "country cousin" of the great civilizations of the ancient Near East. This view is now completely untenable, and Syria must be ranked alongside Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Iran, and the Indus valley as a major center of civilization in antiquity. Photo by the author.

History

The aim of this work is to synthesize the cultural history of man in this sector of the world, from earliest prehistoric times to the modern day. This purpose must involve, in my opinion, the combining of the archeological evidence in all of its complexity with the historical evidence, which is equally complex. Some researchers would like to emphasize a kind of technical archeology, which makes few if any correlations with recorded history. This is an unnecessarily narrow position, making archeological methods the goal rather than the means to reach the goal. It is through the interplay of the archeological data and the historical sources that a fuller synthesis of man's history should begin to emerge; that is a proper goal.

Numerous specialized fields exist, in linguistics, languages, literature, epigraphy, numismatics, and history, to deal with the varied and complex types of written sources relevant to and available for study of the Near East. Of course, no written evidence is available for the

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Paleolithic periods, and protoliterate systems alone are attested in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. Fully developed written sources are first found in Egypt and Mesopotamia in the Early Bronze Age, ca. 3300 B.C., and in Syria the earliest written sources are now known from Ebla, ca. 2300 B.C. The region of Israel and Jordan has not attested its own written evidence until much later, in the Late Bronze Age, ca. 1550–1200 B.C. It should be emphasized that except for sources from Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Mesopotamia, the region of Israel and Jordan is largely “prehistoric” until the Late Bronze Age. It is not until the Iron Age, and especially the Iron II period, that written sources become somewhat more common in Israel and Jordan. Of course, the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods are much better documented historically.

The written materials that have actually come from ancient sites include many different types. A list of some of the more common types would include ostraca, graffiti, seals, coins, milestones, tombstones and funerary texts, letters, building inscriptions, laws, treaties, contracts, administrative and economic texts, myths, hymns, and other religious texts, epics, historical accounts, and royal inscriptions. These written materials represent a very incomplete record, and each new discovery brings modifications in previous reconstructions. Those which come from stratigraphic excavations are the most valuable, but in fact a great many of them are found by chance or are not found in their original chronological context.

In addition to the written materials from ancient sites, many other historical sources have been preserved through the ages to the modern day. For the earlier periods of Near Eastern history, these would include such sources as the Bible and Josephus, and for the later periods such works as those of the Arab geographers and historians. These represent extremely complex sources, often with fairly clear tendencies that must be evaluated by the most critical of methods by specialists in those fields. In evaluating these sources, it is probably most important to determine the types of literature they contain and to determine the chronological distance between the sources themselves and the periods they describe. Only then can each source be evaluated for historical reconstruction.

On the archeological side, how can correlations properly be made between the archeological evidence and the historical sources? Are there any principles or methods that can be agreed upon? A number of important factors can be noted here.

First, it must be established that the geographical location of the archeological data corresponds to the clear geographical references in the historical sources. In some cases, it may be relatively easy to establish the identifications of certain sites, through preserved names, epigraphic discoveries, site locations, and site occupational histories. In most cases, however, site identifications are not possible; even then it may be possible to relate the site geographically to historical events that affected an entire region.

Second, the stratigraphic evidence that is being used for the correlation must be clear. Examples of decisive contexts are widespread destruction layers with intense burning, which can reflect human attack or similar military activity, and massive architectural collapses with intact artifacts and human remains but without fire, which
can reflect earthquake activity.

Third, the chronology of the archeological data must be well established and the chronology of the historical sources must be clear. There can be no correlation if either half is uncertain, and they must be independent of each other, not circular. Ideally, the archeological dating evidence should include a combination of epigraphic evidence and carbon 14 or other dates.

Fourth, correlations cannot be based on a single site, but must be broadly based at many sites, through comparative stratigraphic excavations and surveys, although the reports from those projects must be used very critically.

Finally, the correlations cannot be based on a single cultural trait, but rather must be made on the basis of multiple traits. Examples of traits which should be included are pottery, flints, industries, items of trade, architecture, burial customs, art, inscriptions, site types, settlement patterns, and geographical distribution of sites.

If these principles are followed, it should be possible to correlate the archeological evidence and the historical evidence with increasing accuracy. Unfortunately, often neither the archeological evidence nor the historical evidence is so clear or as complete as we would like, and thus it is often difficult to make firm correlations.

Biblical Studies

The Bible represents the most complex and also the most controversial collection of written sources from the ancient Near East, surviving as a book of faith through the centuries to the modern day. There have been and continue to be many different positions on how to relate the Bible to the archeological evidence. Here I will note several positions that must be rejected, and then I will describe what I see as a proper relationship.

One position is that represented by Judeo-Christian fundamentalism and conservatism. This position assumes the literal accuracy of the biblical sources in all periods. The function of the archeological evidence, therefore, is merely to prove or support the biblical accounts. In the context of the other historical sources, the Bible is considered to be uniquely inspired; it is thus exempted from the kind of critical historical analysis described above. The ultimate factor in this position is personal religious faith.

A second position is represented by those who argue that the Bible should be used little, if at all, in Syro-Palestinian archeological research. This position, held by some scholars both in the west and in the Arab world, is in part a reaction to the fundamentalist position described above. It emphasizes the facts that the Bible presents Near Eastern history from an Israelite perspective alone and that the Bible contains many religious materials of a nonhistorical character. Some modern political motivations can also be present in this position, since the Israelite tradition in the Bible is seen as leading to the modern state of Israel.

A third position could be said to be represented by those biblical scholars, critical and otherwise, who do not include the archeological evidence from the Near East in their biblical studies. Elaborate literary analysis of the Bible is often coupled with modern sociological and anthropological theories, to produce historical judgments divorced from the relevant archeological evidence.

In my opinion, none of these positions can be defended. First, personal religious faith should never be a factor in the evaluation of the Bible as a historical source or
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any time.

To illustrate the difficulty of correlating the archeological evidence and the biblical sources in the period of the patriarchs, I would like to evaluate the recent discussions of the Sodom and Gomorrah traditions in Genesis 13–19. Initially, it was claimed that Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain were attested in the newly discovered Ebla archives of ca. 2300 B.C. Then, new surveys and excavations near the southeast shore of the Dead Sea located five Early Bronze sites, strung out on the hills overlooking the flat land near the Dead Sea. Destruction layers were noted, and the name of one of the sites, “Numeirah,” was said to reflect, by an acceptable sound shift, the biblical name “Gomorrah.”

This argument might seem convincing, but each of the parts must be examined closely. First, the Ebla readings have largely been retracted, or at least enough doubt has been cast upon them to justify skepticism until the definitive publications appear. Even if similar names are confirmed at Ebla, it must be shown that they relate clearly to a particular geographical region. Otherwise, they could represent unrelated sites anywhere in Syria-Palestine, or beyond.

The strongest factor in favor of the position above is clearly the geographical one, but that is not clearcut either. Because of the lack of known sites near the southern end of the Dead Sea, earlier biblical scholars had argued for a location of the cities of the plain either to the north of the Dead Sea, in the Jordan Valley itself, or under the shallow southern end of the Dead Sea. The latter possibility is now known to be highly unlikely, as the southern end of the Dead Sea has been drained and there is no evidence there of any sites. Another geographical interpretation of the biblical account holds that the cities of the plain were located at the northern end of the Dead Sea in the Jordan Valley. Although this view has not been popular in recent years, it does reflect another real possibility.

The fact that five Early Bronze sites have been found is again not as convincing as it at first seems. The Early Bronze period represents over 1000 years of time, and during that time those five sites were not all occupied simultaneously. In addition, it has not been established that all five sites represent city sites, since at least one of the sites thus far attests only cemetery remains. It also cannot be argued that these five sites represent the only Early Bronze sites in the region, or that Middle Bronze sites are lacking, for a fully intensive survey of the region has not been carried out. In fact, numerous Early Bronze sites exist along the foothills of the Jordan Valley to the north, and there are some which are known along the foothills of the Wadi Arabah to the south, so the five sites are anything but unique. Also, intact Middle Bronze (ca. 1950–1550 B.C.) vessels have been found at Safi, one of the five sites. The Early Bronze III destruction evidence likewise is not an unexpected phenomenon. It rather fits into the pattern of Early Bronze III destructions and abandonments throughout Israel and Jordan.

Finally, the argument that the name “Numeirah” represents ancient “Gomorrah” cannot be maintained. The proposed sound shift from ‘ayin in “Gomorrah” to nun in “Numeirah” is virtually impossible in comparative Semitics. Instead, it is clear that “Numeirah” is simply the modern Arabic feminine diminutive form of nimr, meaning “tiger,” and should be translated “little tigress.” Many sites in Jordan have such modern animal-derived names,
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and “Khaneizir,” one of the other five sites under discussion here, derives from khanzir, which means “pig” or “wild boar.”

Thus, the archaeological evidence is actually weak. A correlation with biblical history is not impossible, but it would require much more evidence before it could ever become convincing. In the meantime, many far more important archaeological questions should be asked of these sites than “Are they Sodom and Gomorrah?”

In my opinion, it is only at the end of the Late Bronze Age and in the Iron Age, ca. 1300 B.C., that the archaeological evidence and the biblical sources can begin to be correlated. The biblical sources are then much closer in time to the archeological periods, and the continuous Israelite occupation in the land would provide a more likely context for the transmission of traditions. In addition, the appearance of more epigraphic remains in the archeological evidence becomes an important factor in any correlation.

It is widely accepted that the periods of the United Monarchy and the Divided Kingdoms, ca. 1000 B.C., are well documented both archeologically and biblically (although numerous problems still exist). The preceding Late Bronze II-B Iron I periods, ca. 1300–1000 B.C., are far more controversial. It is not possible to go into details here, but I would like to suggest that a more traditional approach to the Israelite conquest and the period of the Judges may best be supported by the Syro-Palestinian archeological evidence.

Virtually all Late Bronze II sites that have been excavated in Israel and Jordan, as well as in coastal Lebanon and Syria, were destroyed, abandoned, or interrupted in some way at the end of the period. It has not been established if these phenomena occurred at or near the same time, but they clearly represent an important cultural change.

In the region of Israel and Jordan, two different cultures, which can be labelled Iron IA and Iron IB, succeeded the Late Bronze occupations. The stratigraphic evidence at several sites in the hill country of Israel (e.g., Tell Beit Mirsim, Bethel) indicates that the Iron IA culture perhaps slightly preceded the Iron IB culture, even in the Shephelah and along the coast (e.g., Gezer, Ashdod).

In Jordan, the Iron IA culture is attested in the southern Jordan Valley and in the hill country of central and southern Jordan. This culture is characterized by poorly made, undecorated pottery, with the typical collar-rim store jar; by pillared houses, not only in Israel but also in southern Jordan; by pits and the absence of public architecture, except in southern Jordan, where fine fortified settlements are attested (e.g., Medeiyineh North and South); by lack of imported materials and little art, and by settlement patterns characterized by many small sites, some occupied for the first time in the Iron I period.

The Iron IB culture, attested along the coast of Israel, in the Esdraelon Valley, and in the north Jordan Valley, is characterized by finer pottery, often decorated with multiple painted lines, birds, and semicircles, by temples and other public architecture in major city sites, by smelting installations, and by artistic artifacts.

The geographical distribution and the character of the Iron IA sites would suggest that they represent early Israelite, Ammonite, Moabite, and Edomite occupations. Although there are differences between them, the similarities are far more evident, and a basic common physical culture could be attributed to
them. Interestingly, similar materials are not known from Lebanon or Syria.

The geographical distribution of the Iron IB sites and the character of the Iron IB culture, would agree with the longstanding identification of the Iron IB culture with the Philistines or Sea Peoples. Similar materials are well attested all along the eastern Mediterranean coast, including Lebanon and Syria.

The stratigraphic evidence would, in my opinion, agree with the biblical evidence in placing the Iron IA (Israelite) culture in Palestine first. The appearance of the Sea Peoples slightly later, as witnessed by the Egyptian sources (Ramses III), would also agree with the archeological evidence and with the biblical sources.

Thus, although there are many problems of detail, and it is not yet possible to reconstruct the exact nature of the end of the Late Bronze Age in the region of Israel and Jordan, I would argue that the biblical tradition of the Israelite conquest should be taken seriously as an explanation.

Conclusion
Biblical studies relate to only a small part of the great archeological history of the Near East stretching from prehistoric times to the modern day. The discipline of archeology is moving away from biblical studies as a field of its own; like biblical studies, moreover, it has many specializations within it. However, a proper relationship must continue to exist between Syro-Palestinian archeology and biblical studies, one based on the same critical methods applied to all of the other complex historical sources.

At one time the term “Biblical Archeology” was used to describe the entire archeological endeavor in Syria-Palestine, and in fact in the Near East as a whole. Today this is clearly not a correct use of the term, but there is nothing wrong in its being used to describe the proper application of archeological evidence to the Bible. Unfortunately, a great deal of what is published today under the popular heading of “Biblical Archeology” is sensationalistic and speculative in character.

The Judeo-Christian tradition in western civilization clearly traces its ideological roots back to the ancient Near East, and it is thus natural for people from the West to take an interest in the archeology of the Near East, especially as it relates to the Bible. At the same time, there is a growing awareness by the modern peoples of the Near East that their roots are also represented by the rich archeological history of the region. Those who share these common historical roots in the Near East likewise share the responsibility to strive for an ever-better understanding of the history of that region.