

LET THE
STONES

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ONES SPEAK

MARCH-APRIL 2022



JOSHUA'S ALTAR FOUND?

**Uncovering
ancient Jerusalem**

**Searching for
Egypt in Israel**

**Can you trust the
Masoretic Text?**

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FROM THE EDITOR | GERALD FLURRY

Uncovering Ancient Jerusalem!

Some wonderful developments have occurred in ancient Jerusalem over the past 50 years. I believe great discoveries and accomplishments are still to be made.

WHEN THE SIX-DAY WAR ENDED ON JUNE 10, 1967, Israel came away with control over some historically and strategically crucial territory. Of all the land it acquired, none was more important than the relatively small plot of earth on the southeast side of the Old City.

For the first time since it became a sovereign nation in 1948, the nation of Israel had control of the oldest, most important land—the very heart of Jewish history: ANCIENT JERUSALEM!

Israel's leaders were keen to explore the newly obtained land, especially the history that lay beneath it. Many of Israel's archaeologists couldn't wait to sink their hands into the dirt, to start removing millennia of rubble and decay, in hopes of revealing the original city of Jerusalem.

In 1968, a little over a year after Israel's victory, the massive, multiyear Temple Mount excavations began. The effort was led by archaeologist and Hebrew University president Prof. Benjamin Mazar. The new project electrified many people in Israel and even across the world. When Professor Mazar began to assemble his "Temple Mount team," many universities



and organizations from around the world were keen to join. By December 1968, after numerous meetings and visits, Professor Mazar and Hebrew University cemented a partnership with Herbert W. Armstrong and Ambassador College, a small liberal arts college headquartered in Pasadena, California.

Chancellor Armstrong was ecstatic. He knew how unique and special this opportunity was. In a letter to supporters, he wrote, “Ambassador College has just been given the great honor and responsibility of entering joint participation with Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the most important archaeological excavation of our time—uncovering 3,000 years of history!”

Given that excavations had barely begun, the claim that 3,000-year-old remains would be revealed and that this would be the “most important archaeological excavation of our time” was pretty bold. But Mr. Armstrong proved to be right!

I visited Jerusalem in March and was able to visit the Ophel and the City of David. During my visit, I studied and contemplated Mr. Armstrong’s 1968 letter and was moved by this man’s vision and excitement for ancient Jerusalem. I was also struck by the accuracy of his forecast: Over the last 50 years, thanks to the efforts of organizations like Hebrew University, the Israel Antiquities Authority and the City of David Foundation, *a wealth of 3,000-year-old remains have been uncovered.*

And I agree with Mr. Armstrong: The archaeology happening in the City of David and on the Ophel is the most important! Many other important archaeological excavations are taking place in Israel and even elsewhere around the world. Talented archaeologists are undertaking some crucial digs all over Israel. But there is **ONLY ONE** ancient Jerusalem!

Since 2006, Herbert W. Armstrong College has been privileged to pick up the mantle of Mr. Armstrong and has partnered with Hebrew University in continuing the search for the original Jerusalem. Working under the leadership of Professor Mazar’s granddaughter, the late Dr. Eilat Mazar, we have engaged in digs in the northern part of the ancient City of David and the southeastern corner of the Ophel, an area originally excavated by Benjamin Mazar.

We partnered with Dr. Mazar because we believe, as Mr. Armstrong and Professor Mazar did, that the original Jerusalem not only was waiting to be uncovered but would furnish some truly monumental finds.

Many modern scholars claim that King David and King Solomon were insignificant tribal chieftains; a few even claim these men were not real. They dismiss entirely the biblical record, which says David and Solomon were impressive kings who built great structures in Jerusalem, including their palaces and the temple. You can read about their accomplishments in 2 Samuel 5 and 1 Kings 5-8. But

many scholars and archaeologists do not believe the Bible; some call those who consider it a reliable historical source “religious fanatics.”

Dr. Eilat Mazar was no religious fanatic. But she did consider the Bible a legitimate historical document, and she used it a lot in her practice of archaeology. What was the result? *Eilat made some of the greatest archaeological discoveries ever made!* She found palatial remains from both David and Solomon!

“[A] careful examination of the biblical text combined with sometimes unnoticed results of modern archaeological excavations in Jerusalem enable us, I believe, to locate the site of King David’s palace,” wrote Dr. Mazar in the January-February 1997 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. This was a bold claim, but it was backed by both science and the Bible.

Eilat continued: “Even more exciting, it is in an area that is now available for excavation. If some regard as too speculative the hypothesis I shall put forth in this article, my reply is simply this: Let us put it to the test in the way archaeologists always try to test their theories—by excavation.”

I still marvel at Dr. Mazar’s audacious approach. In the *BAR* article, there was even a big red arrow pointing to the spot Eilat believed the palace could be found. And yet, as exciting as the suggestion was, and as scientifically sound as it was, it took 10 years for Dr. Mazar to find someone to fund her dig. In 2005, thanks to the generosity of Roger Hertog, Eilat was finally able to start excavating.

Almost immediately, she and her team began uncovering a massive structure that dated to the time period that includes King David. (We have written extensively about the Large Stone Structure; you can find these articles at our website, *ArmstrongInstitute.org*.) When people visit the City of David today, they can see the palace walls we uncovered; they can see and touch *ancient Jerusalem!*

After her excavations at the City of David, Eilat turned her attention to the Ophel area, which is only a couple of hundred meters north. Here she continued the excavations of her grandfather. She expected to find some monumental structures here too. Why? Because the Bible records that this is where King Solomon built the temple, his own palace and the House of the Forest of Lebanon (his armory), as well as other significant

structures (1 Kings 6-7). Dr. Mazar would often refer to the Ophel area as the *royal Solomonian complex*.

We dug on the Ophel with Eilat from 2009 to her final season in 2018. Together, we excavated through centuries of later occupation and revealed a massive 10th-century B.C.E. city wall, as well as an enormous gatehouse. Sections of these structures are over 5 meters high, which is evidence of the monumental nature of the structure.

In support of Dr. Mazar and Hebrew University, we have also uncovered other biblically significant discoveries, including the seal impressions of King Hezekiah and Isaiah. The Isaiah bulla is still being analyzed; while compelling, the evidence that the bulla belonged to Isaiah *the prophet* is not absolutely conclusive. But the Hezekiah bulla reads: “Belonging to Hezekiah, [son of] Ahaz, King of Judah.”

To date, these tiny clay artifacts are the only seal impressions belonging to an Israelite or Judean king as well as a prophet ever to have been found in controlled scientific excavations. Again, you can learn more about these finds at *ArmstrongInstitute.org*.

King David’s palace, the royal Jerusalem of King Solomon, and the personal seal impression of King Hezekiah and Isaiah—these are just a handful of the sensational discoveries from the original Jerusalem that go back 3,000 years—tangible fruits of biblical history that visitors to Jerusalem can now experience.

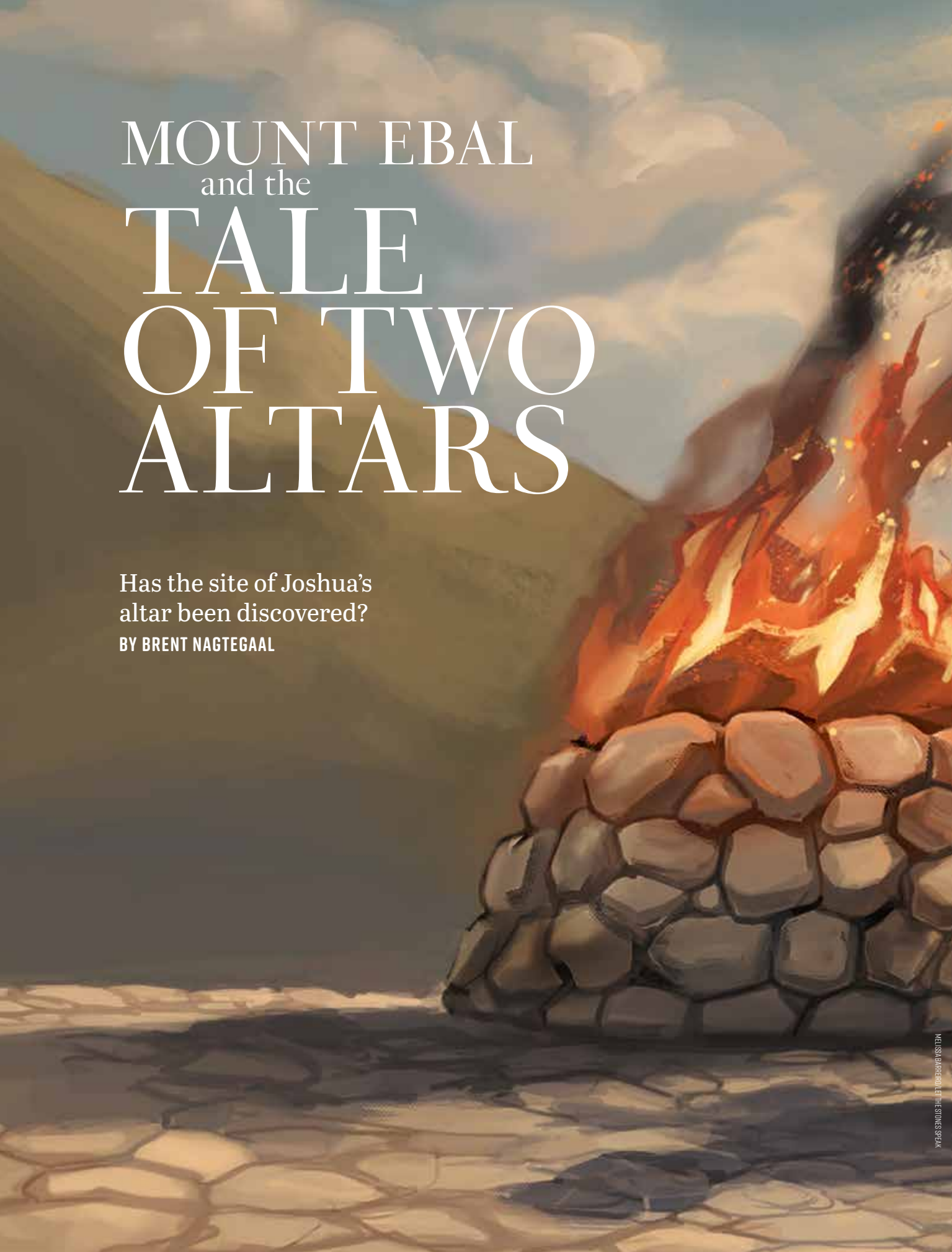
Dr. Mazar spoke with us fairly often about how it was the public, the everyday, regular people of Israel—not the scholars—who most deeply valued ancient Jerusalem and its biblical history. The vision of sharing Israel’s biblical history with regular people also motivated Professor Mazar, Herbert Armstrong and early leaders like former President Zalman Shazar and Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek.

It is hard to believe 50 years have passed since Mr. Armstrong and Professor Mazar first began excavating ancient Jerusalem. Together, these men accomplished some great archaeology around the Temple Mount. More importantly, these men generated the vision and laid the foundation for the wonderful, crucial work still happening in the City of David and on the Ophel.

In a way, it all began in 1968 with Professor Mazar and Herbert Armstrong.

Mr. Armstrong, Professor Mazar and Dr. Mazar are no longer with us. But their vision and legacy remain strong. Actually, I believe their vision will only grow stronger as we continue to excavate the City of David and the Ophel. Many great and wonderful developments have occurred in ancient Jerusalem over the past 50 years, and I believe there are still some great and wonderful discoveries and accomplishments to be made! ■

Dr. Mazar boldly proclaimed her hypothesis in the January-February 1997 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*.



MOUNT EBAL and the TALE OF TWO ALTARS

Has the site of Joshua's
altar been discovered?

BY BRENT NAGTEGAAL



JUST BEFORE HE DIED, MOSES GAVE JOSHUA instruction on how he should lead Israel into the Promised Land. Following the battles at Jericho and Ai, the Israelites were told to assemble in the mountains surrounding Shechem, the place Abraham first sacrificed to God when he entered the region roughly 500 years earlier.

Moses's instructions were explicit and detailed. Six tribes were told to gather on Mount Gerizim, the other six on Mount Ebal. Joshua then had leading men read from the book of Deuteronomy. The people were reminded of the blessings they would receive if they obeyed God and the curses that would come if they disobeyed. After that, the six tribes on each mountain were instructed to sing back and forth, their voices resonating across the valley. The tribes on Mount Gerizim rehearsed the blessings; the six tribes on Mount Ebal responded by singing the curses (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:1-13).

But before this grand alfresco choral performance, Joshua did something important. "Then Joshua built an altar unto the Lord, the God of Israel, in mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of unhewn stones, upon which no man had lifted up any iron; and they offered thereon burnt-offerings unto the Lord, and sacrificed peace-offerings" (Joshua 8:30-31).

Joshua began this momentous event by building an altar on Mount Ebal and giving offerings to God.

Like many stories in the Bible, the tale of Joshua's Mt. Ebal altar and Israel's epic outdoor concert is widely considered to be fiction. But what if it isn't? What if, like many stories in the Bible, this account is corroborated by archaeology?

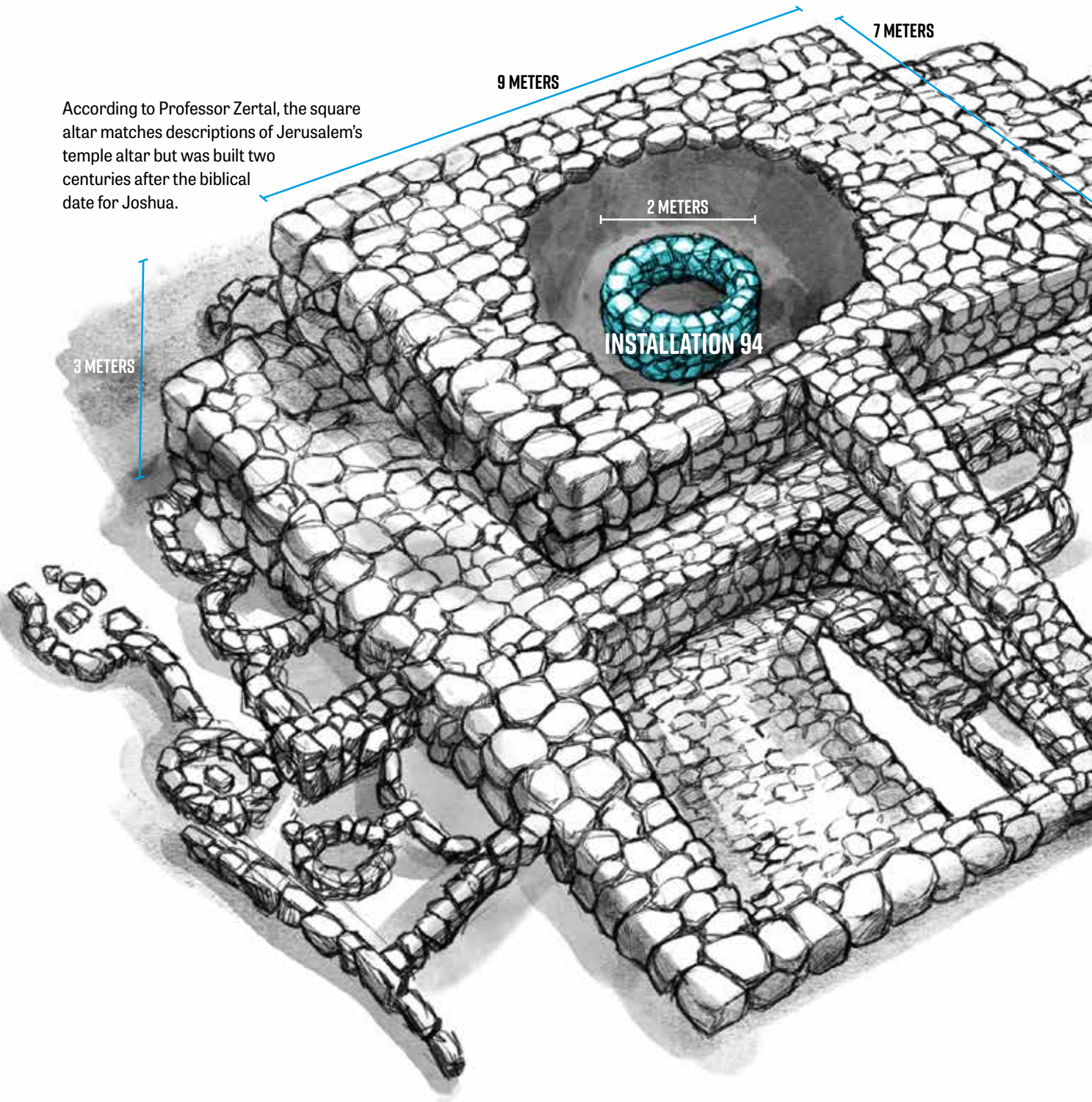
What if Joshua's altar has been discovered?

A Chance Discovery

Mount Ebal is situated in the mountains of Samaria, roughly 50 kilometers north of Jerusalem. While there is agreement on Mount Ebal's identity, the question of whether there is an altar on the mountain has been debated for nearly four decades. This debate began in the 1980s largely as a result of the work of Prof. Adam Zertal, the late Haifa University archaeologist.

Following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, Zertal was keen to survey and explore the territory acquired from Jordan. He was especially interested in the northern territory, in what was known in biblical times as the hill country of Manasseh. "A window of opportunity had opened, and for the first time, my generation would steal a glimpse at the place where

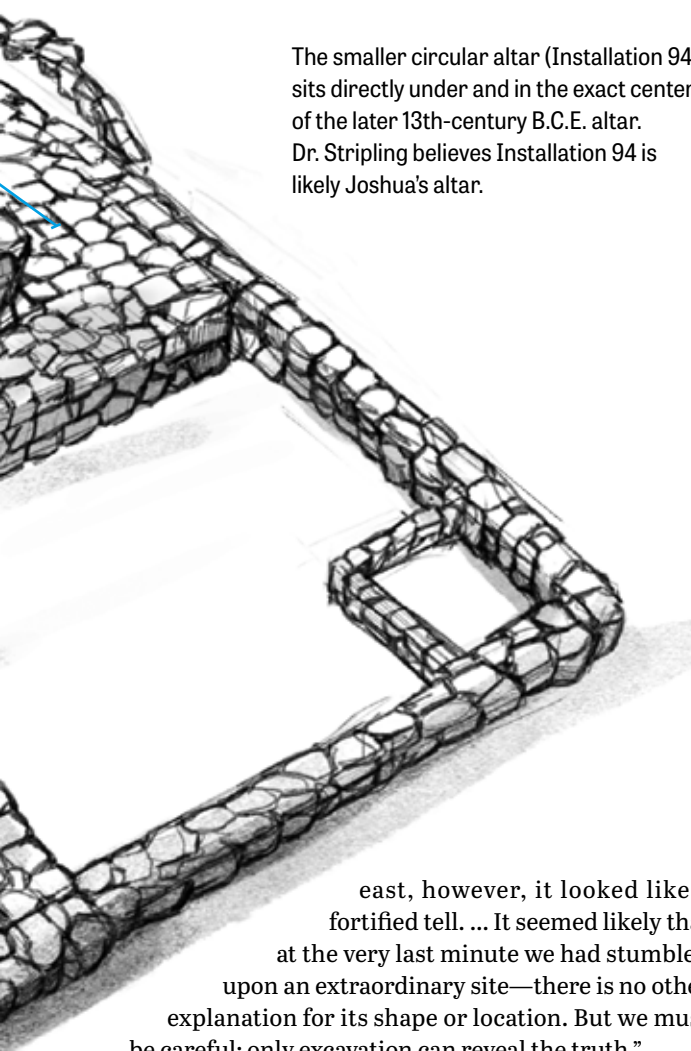
According to Professor Zertal, the square altar matches descriptions of Jerusalem's temple altar but was built two centuries after the biblical date for Joshua.



the central narratives of the Bible took place,” Zertal wrote in *A Nation Born*. “No one before us had been granted an opportunity so grand and a responsibility so great.”

Professor Zertal’s massive “Manasseh survey” began in 1978 and ended in 1990. During his 12 years of exploration, he located dozens of ancient sites, 80 percent of which had never been documented.

On Sunday, April 6, 1980, Zertal made his most famous and most electrifying discovery. His team was exploring El-Burnat, the Arabic name of a site on the east side of Mount Ebal, about 200 meters down from the mountain peak. “As usual, the surprise of the day came at the last minute!” Zertal recounted in his field journal. “We’d spotted the rock pile earlier, but attached no significance to it. When we approached from the



The smaller circular altar (Installation 94) sits directly under and in the exact center of the later 13th-century B.C.E. altar. Dr. Stripling believes Installation 94 is likely Joshua's altar.

east, however, it looked like a fortified tell. ... It seemed likely that at the very last minute we had stumbled upon an extraordinary site—there is no other explanation for its shape or location. But we must be careful; only excavation can reveal the truth.”

Professor Zertal began to excavate El-Burnat two years later. Between 1982 and 1987, his team conducted five separate excavations on Mount Ebal.

During the first excavation, the team removed layers of field stones. These stones, Zertal observed, seemed to have been placed intentionally for the purpose of covering the structure below. With the stones gone, Zertal was able to more clearly delineate the large structure. The structure was 30 meters square and protruded 3 meters high.

Through the next four excavations, Zertal found large amounts of ash and bone in the area around the large structure. In fact, he found more than 1,000 bones, all of which came from young, choice male animals. This indicated the site had been used for animal sacrifices carried out according to biblical guidelines.

But what exactly was the large structure? The “aha” moment occurred toward the end of the day on Thursday, Oct. 13, 1983. Zvi Koenigsberg, a colleague of Zertal, wrote for the *Jerusalem Post* on January 26 this year: “Zertal and I were having coffee while the

volunteers were busy washing the pottery they had dug from the ground that day. Zertal was working with a pencil and paper, and then handed me a drawing of what he thought the structure beneath the pile of stones would look like when it was completely revealed.

“I was thunderstruck, and bolted from the table without saying a word. I returned moments later with a book, opened to the page I had been seeking, and handed it to Zertal. It was now his turn to be thunderstruck. The book was one of the tractates of the Mishna, the first post-biblical code of Jewish law, compiled around c.E. 200. The page had a drawing of the altar of the Jerusalem temple, drawn to the specifications of the description in the text. The similarity between the two drawings was striking.”

To say the altar Joshua built on Mount Ebal was discovered would be a sensational claim—one that would inevitably be greeted with both excitement and staunch criticism. The evidence was compelling. The excavation was situated on what was known to be Mount Ebal. Zertal had uncovered a massive structure, one with design and function that was unparalleled in the archaeological world. And he had uncovered both ash and animal bones, both signs of sacrifices.

Yet even Zertal struggled to accept that he had discovered archaeological evidence of this early period of biblical history. He was a secular archaeologist, not a religious crusader striving to verify the Bible. But faced with compelling evidence of an altar site on Mount Ebal, Zertal could not ignore or reject the remarkable connection between the stones he had excavated and the biblical narrative.

Zertal described his thought process in *A Nation Born*: “The problem now was how to present what we’d found. *My academic background made it difficult for me to accept the idea of Joshua’s altar being a tangible reality.* After all, Moses is not a historical figure, and the Torah lacks any substantive archaeological support. In the end, *I was obliged to overcome each of my thousand-and-one doubts,* for it seemed that we had made a discovery as unlikely as finding Sodom and Gomorrah. ... If we have found material evidence of a story as early as Joshua’s, who knows how far back the archaeological record can take us” (emphasis added throughout).

As credentialed and respected as Professor Zertal was, the announcement that he had found Joshua’s altar was met with skepticism by many in the archaeological community. Most agreed with his dating (around 1200 B.C.E.) of the large structure and did not deny the presence of ash and sacrificial animal bones. Still, the assertion that it was an altar was a step too far.

Not everyone rejected Zertal’s claim, however. In fact, a handful of experienced and esteemed scientists

were believers, including Prof. Benjamin Mazar, the head of Hebrew University and one of Israel's most respected archaeologists. Professor Mazar first visited and examined the site on Oct. 16, 1983. "His appetite for information was almost insatiable," wrote Zertal. "Around noon, as we snacked in the shade of a canopy, Mazar stirred the sugar in his cup deliberately and said, "This is really a tremendous discovery. But get ready for a long and difficult struggle. Not everyone will agree with you." Professor Mazar was right.

Zertal debated the merits of his Mount Ebal discovery for more than three decades, up until his death in 2015. In that time, more of Zertal's colleagues came around to his identification of the Mount Ebal structure as an altar. For many others, however, it was easier to simply ignore the discovery.

Recently, a third view of Professor Zertal's discovery on Mount Ebal has emerged.

An Earlier Altar?

A few years ago, American archaeologist Dr. Scott Stripling turned his attention to Mount Ebal and Professor Zertal's excavations. Stripling began studying the mount because he wanted to understand how it

might connect with his important excavations in Shiloh.

Given the choice, Dr. Stripling would have liked to have continued Zertal's excavations on Mount Ebal. But this is largely impossible as the site is situated in politically sensitive territory. So Dr. Stripling did the next best thing: He wet-sifted the material excavated by Zertal that was left in piles adjacent to the large structure.

Entering the project, Stripling believed Zertal had found the altar mentioned in Joshua 8, but that it was an *earlier* altar built on the same site. To understand Stripling's view, it's important to understand exactly what the Bible relates about Joshua's conquest. The biblical text firmly supports an early date of the conquest, indicating that Joshua and Israel began conquering Canaan around 1400 B.C.E.

This date is different from the one suggested by Professor Zertal and others. Those who propose a later date for Joshua's conquest believe Israel entered the Promised Land in the late 13th century, sometime close to 1200 B.C.E. (For more on this, see sidebar "Dating the Exodus.")

In Zertal's excavations, he documented the presence of an earlier altar directly underneath the massive

DATING THE EXODUS

There are two primary schools of thought on the date of the Exodus. One believes the Exodus occurred in the 15th century B.C.E.; the other, the 13th century.

The first view is based on biblical chronology. The Bible records many genealogies and events, some of which can be aligned with secular events recorded in historical documents. Putting together the Bible and ancient secular history, it is possible to fix a reasonably solid date for the construction of Solomon's temple: circa 967 B.C.E. (a date agreed upon by proponents of both schools). 1 Kings 6:1 states that the temple began to be built in the 480th year after Israel left Egypt, thus putting the Exodus around 1446 B.C.E. and the entry into Canaan 40 years later, around 1406 B.C.E. This date matches several other scriptures, including Jephthah's speech (around

1100 B.C.E.) about the Israelites having been 300 years in the land (Judges 11:26); and genealogical information, such as the 19 successive generations from the Exodus to David, listed in 1 Chronicles 6. (For a 13th-century Exodus, this would have each new generation conceived at an average of roughly 12 years old.)

The belief that the Exodus occurred in the 13th century B.C.E. is based on the interpretation of select archaeological evidence. A number of sites across Israel have destruction layers dating to the 13th century. Some archaeologists believe these destruction layers represent the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land following their departure from Egypt. Further, Exodus 1:11 says the Israelites built a city in Egypt named Ramses. Pharaoh Ramesses II (popularly considered the pharaoh of the Exodus) reigned during the 13th century and built the city Pi-Ramesses.

However, there are other explanations for both the 13th-century destruction layers and the city of "Ramses." The 13th-century destruction layers in Canaan fit arguably better within the brutal period of the judges (as the Bible only describes *three* cities being burned during Joshua's conquest, with an emphasis on others being spared—i.e. Joshua 11:3; Deuteronomy 6:10-11). Additionally, placing the Exodus in the 13th century overlooks 15th-to-14th-century destruction layers discovered at specific post-Exodus sites whose destruction is mentioned in the Bible.

As for the city "Ramses," the Bible actually mentions this location during the days of the patriarch Jacob, many centuries before its construction (Genesis 47:11). It is, then, clearly used as an anachronistic name for an earlier site.

square altar. This altar, which he termed Installation 94 in his preliminary report, is much smaller than the large square structure. It has a diameter of only 2 meters.

The shape of this smaller altar is also important. It's not square, like the large altar. It is circular and made from unworked, medium-size stones. In his report, Zertal noted that directly on top of this smaller altar was a 10-centimeter layer of clean ash containing animal bones, many of which were burnt. Here's what Zertal wrote about this smaller altar just before he died: "It would be some time before we'd realize that this was the core, the very heart of the ritual within the ancient structure. This was it—the primogential ritual site on Mount Ebal."

Zertal believed this smaller altar was built shortly before the larger altar and dated to the same relative period (around 1200 B.C.E.). While Dr. Stripling agrees that the smaller altar was built prior to the larger structure, he believes the evidence indicates that the smaller, earlier altar was built much earlier, even 200 years earlier (around 1400 B.C.E., the time of Joshua's conquest).

Dr. Stripling supports his view with evidence uncovered during the wet-sifting of Professor Zertal's fill material. Upon examining the fill, Stripling's team uncovered a higher percentage of pottery styles that can be dated to an earlier period than what Zertal suggested in his preliminary report. The presence of pottery from an earlier period suggests an earlier use of the site.

Stripling also takes issue with the traditional interpretation of the Egyptian scarab of Pharaoh Thutmose III, which was found in the assemblage associated with the round altar. The traditional view, held by experts like Baruch Barndl, is that the Thutmose III scarab is commemorative and belongs in the 13th century. "This is nothing new," writes Stripling. "The identification of 18th-dynasty scarabs from sites like Mount Ebal, Shiloh and Jericho are often judged to be commemorative because they challenged the dominant late-date theory. The theory now drives the interpretation" (*Five Views on the Exodus*).

Stripling believes the Thutmose seal is likely not commemorative but instead provides the very evidence of a far earlier date for the construction of the earlier circular altar. Finally, he notes that a small amount of Late Bronze Age (15th century) pottery found beneath



Professor Zertal stands in front of the altar on Mount Ebal.



the square altar belongs to the earlier activity on the site.

When you consider the various elements, a new view emerges. "I believe that this pottery, a Late Bronze pumice chalice from (Pit 250), a small amount of animal bone from inside the round altar and the Thutmose III scarab all point to a 15th-century date for the round altar," writes Stripling. "Everyone agrees with Zertal that the rectangular altar dates to the 13th century. [But] the round altar likely belongs to the late 15th century and IS PLAUSIBLY THE ALTAR THAT JOSHUA BUILT" (ibid).

A Future Excavation

As Dr. Stripling noted, the only way to conclusively settle this debate is to excavate the site further. Sadly, this isn't likely to happen anytime soon. But if it could, Zertal left part of Installation 94 intact, meaning modern excavation methods could help settle the age of the earlier altar. Yet even without excavation, we are not without options or answers.

Dr. Stripling's wet-sifting project on Mount Ebal continues and could furnish new finds (see the interview with Dr. Stripling, page 12, for more such evidence).

In the meantime, much like Professor Zertal, those curious to know more can continue to hope. In spite of his detractors, Zertal believed that the truth based on evidence would prevail. As he wrote in *A Nation Born*, "I couldn't comprehend the blistering reactions. I believed then as I do today; that in the end, the truth will come to light." ■



INTERVIEW WITH DR. STRIPLING: Joshua, Mt. Ebal and the Discovery of an Ancient Hebrew Amulet

ARCHAEOLOGIST SCOTT STRIPLING IS the provost at The Bible Seminary in Katy (Houston), Texas, and is the director of excavations for the Associates for Biblical Research at Khirbet el-Maqtir and Shiloh, Israel. In January, *Let the Stones Speak* assistant managing editor Brent Nagtegaal interviewed Dr. Stripling and discussed his effort to examine fill from excavations conducted by the late Prof. Adam Zertal on Mount Ebal.

BRENT NAGTEGAAL: Let's start with the *Jerusalem Post* article from this week: "Ancient Hebrew Amulet Discovered at Joshua's Altar in Samaria." This was a pretty sensational article. Tell us about Joshua's altar and this amulet and your part in all of this.

SCOTT STRIPLING: Sure. We have been excavating in the highlands of Israel since 1979, first at Khirbet Nisya, then at Khirbet el-Maqtir, and now Shiloh. [These are all conquest sites. After Ai (which we believe is Khirbet el-Maqtir), the biblical text tells us that the Israelites went north and renewed their covenant at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Ancient Shechem is in the middle, of course. Joshua 8:30 says that Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal.

[Prof.] Adam Zertal discovered this [archaeological site] in his Manasseh survey and in the 1980s excavated the site. Zertal was shocked to discover that it was indeed an altar. He was coming from more of a secular training and mindset. It [the discovery of the altar] caused him to believe in the historicity of the [biblical] text. Sadly, Zertal died before his final publications were done, but he did do a very good preliminary report which he published in *Tel Aviv* (the archaeology journal).

An entire issue of *Tel Aviv* was devoted to it, about 100 pages. Zertal documented his discovery of a rectangular altar that had been intentionally covered and at the geometric center of that altar was an earlier round altar that was clearly older. It had been protected and venerated by the later rectangular altar.

BN: What was the reaction to Professor Zertal's assertion that he had discovered Joshua's altar on Mount Ebal?

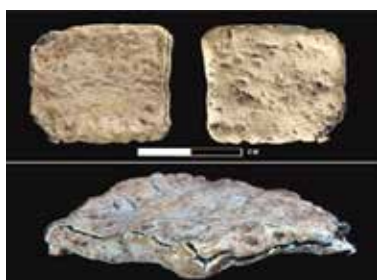
SS: As you know, *Tel Aviv* is a very secular environment; so they were kind of shocked. [Many thought] *Adam has gone off the reservation*, so to speak. He was ignored to some extent initially, [though] eventually people did engage with him. [Some] people of great esteem, like Anson Rainey, did not believe that it was an altar, for example. [Dr.] William Dever tended to take issue with Zertal as well. But many others were open to the possibility and were awaiting his final publication, which unfortunately we never got.

BN: Tell us about the two altars, the square altar and the circular altar at the center. How does this happen?

SS: OK. We have a 2-by-2 meter in diameter round altar that is at the perfect geometric center of the later rectangular altar. Zertal's own recorded belief was that the later altar was intentionally built to venerate and protect the earlier altar, which was a *temenos* [or holy place].

Unfortunately, very little attention has been paid to [the round altar]. Many people focus on the rectangular altar as Joshua's altar. [But] it appears to me that people later in the Iron age, probably early in Iron I, built this [larger square altar] to venerate the cultic site on Mount Ebal.

BN: So Professor Zertal found two altars. He excavated the large square altar, but never fully excavated the round altar in the center. Where do you fit into the picture?



SS: That's correct. Zertal left part of the round altar unexcavated. In a perfect world, we would like to excavate it and excavate the entire area with new technology, get good clean carbon dates, get fresh pottery, fresh faunal analysis. Unfortunately, [due to the political situation] we cannot excavate Mount Ebal. But we were able to do something really cool.

BN: What was that?

SS: In December 2019, I was able to take a team and wet-sift about 30 percent of Zertal's dump piles. He had two huge dump piles, one on the east and one on the west. About 75 to 80 percent of our material came from the east dump pile. We dry-sifted it (again), and then we wet-sifted it. So it wasn't excavation. It was a reexamination of the discarded material.

[Prof Zertal was very thorough and did a great job sifting the dump], but nobody can get everything without wet-sifting. We found over 300 pieces of diagnostic pottery, a number of diagnostic flints and some important objects. And most importantly, [we found a] small lead tablet that appears to be a defixio, [or what is commonly called a] "curse tablet."

BN: This tiny curse tablet measured 2 centimeters by 2 centimeters and was made from lead. And it was folded, which suggested there might be something inside it. Tell us more about this tablet. Were you there when it was discovered? Where is it now?

SS: Yes, my team discovered it. After we had dry-sifted the material, it went through the wet-sifting protocols. After that, the trays go to a supervisor to check. One of our staff members, Frankie Snyder, who is very experienced, recognized it and showed it to me. I grabbed my heart because I knew what I saw—that it was a defixio. These are more common in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but they can exist much earlier.

BN: Is there anything written on this curse tablet? There has been some discussion that there's an aleph on it? Tell us why this would be exciting.

SS: Sure, we believe that we can see, with the naked eye, symbols on the outside—glyptic remains. What appeared to be a lotus flower, you know, what might be a Hebrew letter, for example. But we are only looking

INTERVIEW PAGE 22 ►

Egypt, Gold Tongues and the 'Sin of Achan'

Recent discoveries in Egypt shine light on what appears to be a remarkable parallel.

BY CHRISTOPHER EAMES

IN JANUARY 2021, EGYPT'S MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND Antiquities announced a remarkable discovery at a site just outside Alexandria: two 2,000-year-old mummies that, within their jaws, contained *gold tongues*. The peculiar find made headlines around the world. The discovery, together with a handful of other previously discovered gold tongues, relates to a time when Egypt was ruled by the Roman Empire.

Later that same year, Spanish archaeologists of the University of Barcelona, working in El Bahnasa, a Nile River town in central Egypt, made another remarkable parallel discovery: three burials (a man, woman and child), belonging to Egypt's 26th dynasty (seventh to sixth centuries B.C.E.), each containing a gold tongue. The woman's and 3-year-old child's tomb had been raided in antiquity—clearly, the tongues overlooked—but the man's tomb was in a pristine, untouched condition, an extremely rare and valuable find.

In their announcement of the discovery, Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities stated the gold foil tongues were likely intended to help the dead speak with the gods in the afterlife. Commenting on the discovery, Dr. Lorelei Corcoran of the University of Memphis stated: "Within an Egyptian funerary context, its reference is to Spell 158 of the *Book of the Dead* [a text

which first began to be composed around 1550 B.C.E.], which ensures that the deceased has the ability to breathe and speak, as well as to eat and drink, in the afterlife. It may be conflated with the Greek funerary practice of placing a coin on or in the mouth of the deceased as payment for the ferryman, Caron, who transported the deceased across the River Styx to the Underworld."

With these discoveries in mind, consider a peculiar biblical verse.

Several passages of the Hebrew Bible make figurative comparisons between the tongue and precious metals or jewels (i.e. Proverbs 10:20; 20:15; 25:11; Psalm 119:72). But an especially notable mention is found in Joshua 7.

The book of Joshua famously documents the arrival of the Israelite slaves from Egypt into the Promised Land and the conquest of Canaan. Chapter 7 describes the first major setback for the Israelites: their defeat at Ai. Prior to this defeat, an individual named Achan had stolen certain items from the last-defeated city, Jericho, thus bringing a curse upon the Israelites.

In verses 20-21, Achan confesses his actions: "Of a truth I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done. When I saw among the spoil a goodly Shinar mantle [cloak], and two hundred



Egyptian burial with golden tongue



The gold foil tongues of the child, man and woman

shekels of silver, and a *wedge of gold* of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it.” The term “wedge” is not a literal translation; the Hebrew word is *lashon*, or “tongue.” Achan was referring to a *tongue of gold*.

This Hebrew word for “tongue” is used 117 times in the Bible. In 111 cases, it refers to either a literal tongue or speaking. Three times it refers to a sea inlet, and once to a flame of fire. The two other mentions are in Joshua 7, referring to this stolen piece of gold (verses 21 and 24). Nowhere else is gold referred to in such a manner.

Some translators and commentators understandably take the reference as a figurative word for a wedge or bar of gold. Others, like the *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary*, take the reference to mean “literally, an ingot or bar in the shape of a tongue.” *Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible* calls it a “plate of gold in the shape of a tongue.”

The recent discoveries out of Egypt shine light on what appears to be a remarkable parallel. The Israelites, at this point in time, were an *Egyptianized* populace. Many of the Torah laws that seem so peculiar today are actually a direct rebuke to pagan Egyptian customs. Perhaps in light of such Egyptian familiarity and

practices, this gold object was referred to by Achan as a “tongue.” Or perhaps in its most literal sense, it could have been just that: a burial tongue.

At 50 shekels in weight, it would have been a far more substantive piece than the recently discovered gold tongues. Depending on the interpretation of weights during this period, this would have constituted an estimated total of 700 grams (25 ounces), perhaps less. In comparison, our modern Good Delivery standard gold brick (the type often seen on TV or movies) weighs 12.4 kilograms (437 ounces, or 27.3 pounds)—more than 17 times the weight.

Canaan around this time (as the Amarna Letters show) was under heavy Egyptian influence and subservience. And it’s interesting also to note that this gold “tongue” was found along with an expensive mantle, or cloak, as well as silver treasure. Perhaps they all belonged to the same setting—perhaps Achan raided a tomb at Jericho—a “tongue” and mantle going together as part of the burial.

For now, we can only speculate. But the parallel word choice in Joshua 7 is fascinating—and it certainly wouldn’t be the first time the field of archaeology has not only confirmed biblical historicity but also illuminated biblical interpretation. ■

JOSHUA'S CONQUEST OF THE PROMISED LAND

The Israelites concluded their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness with a stop in Shittim, where Joshua received instruction about Israel's incursion into the land of Canaan. From Shittim, the nation crossed the Jordan River (Joshua 3) and arrived in Gilgal shortly before Passover. Using Gilgal as its base of operations, Israel's army conquered Jericho, then Ai. Following the battle at Ai, God commanded the people to gather in the region of Shechem. Here, Joshua led them in renewing their covenant with God.

Following this, Joshua led Israel in three general military campaigns. In the Central Campaign, Israel subjugated the cities of Jericho, Ai and Gibeon. Then he began the Southern Campaign, where it conquered various cities and peoples across the south (Joshua 9-10). With the south largely (but not completely) under its control, Israel began its Northern Campaign (Joshua 11).

While Israel had tremendous success in conquering the land of Canaan, the Bible records that it did not completely conquer all the territory. Judges 1 enumerates the territories where the Israelites failed to drive out the Canaanites.

JERICO

Jericho was the first city attacked by Israel when it entered Canaan. During John Garstang's 1930s excavations of Tel Jericho, a major destruction layer was found and dated to c. 1400 B.C.E. Evidence at the site showed the fortification walls had collapsed outward (Joshua 6:20), widespread burning (verse 24), and remains of large stores of harvested grain, which showed this conflagration happened during springtime (Joshua 5:10-12), and indicating the site had not been pillaged by the invaders (Joshua 6:17-19).

AI



Israel lost its first battle with Ai. The Bible records that Joshua identified the curse ("the sin of Achan"), repented, and won the second battle. Recent excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir have given credence to this as the site of Ai, along with its fit with a number of biblical geographic parameters (proximity to Beth Aven and Bethel—Joshua 7:2; 12:9; and specific valleys for ambush—Joshua 8:9-14). Evidence at the site reveals a 15th-century B.C.E. occupation and remains of a fiery destruction at the end of that century (Joshua 8:19, 28).

MT. GERIZIM
 Mountain of "blessings." Unlike Mount Ebal, the Bible does not describe an altar being established on this mountain.

MT. EBAL
 Mountain of "curses," in which Joshua established an altar. A large, Israelite-style, 13th-century B.C.E. altar has been excavated at the site, revealing an inner, earlier altar that it was built around. A miniature lead tablet has been discovered at the site, tentatively dating to the end of the Late Bronze Age, that may contain the word "curse."



- CENTRAL CAMPAIGN
- NORTHERN CAMPAIGN
- SOUTHERN CAMPAIGN

TIRZAH

ZARETHAN

ADAM

MT. EBAL

SHECHEM

TAPPUAH

SHILOH

MT. GERIZIM

BETH-AVEN

AI

GILGAL

UPPER BETH HORON

BETHEL

KEPHIRAH

AIJALON

GIBEON

KIRIATH JEARIM

JERICHO

JERUSALEM

RABBAH OF THE AMMONITES

HESHBON

BEZER

MT. NEBO

MEDEBA

BETH JESHIMOSH

JARMUTH

AZEKAH

LIBNAH

ADULLAM

GATH

HEBRON

MAKKEDAH

DEAD SEA

DIBON

EGLON

EN GEDI

KEDEMOTH

JAHAZ

AROR

DEBIR



Searching for Egypt in Israel

Did Moses really write the Torah?
Or was it written by Jewish authors
centuries, if not a millennium, later?

BY CHRISTOPHER EAMES

WERE THE ANCIENT Israelites ever really slaves in Egypt? Were the plagues real? Did the Exodus really happen? The subject of Israel's sojourn in Egypt has been asked, debated, examined and reexamined since the birth of biblical archaeology.

Depending on whom you read or listen to, you're likely to get polar opposite answers. In April 2019, *Haaretz* published an article titled "Were Hebrews Ever Slaves in Ancient Egypt? Yes," by archaeologist Philippe Bohstrom. A few days later, *Haaretz* ran an article on the same topic by archaeology correspondent Ariel David, this one titled "For You Were (Not) Slaves in Egypt."

What to believe?

When considering evidence of Israel in Egypt, scientists have generally searched for *material evidence*. Archaeologists look for destruction layers and physical items and artifacts that testify to Israel's presence. This approach is logical, and it has produced important finds. But it isn't the only means of investigating whether or not Abraham's descendants really did "sojourn" in Egypt. Another approach would be to look for evidence of *Egypt in Israel*. Specifically, evidence in the foundational book of Israel's history, the Torah.

This is the approach taken by Prof. Joshua Berman, of Bar-Ilan University's Zalman Shamir Bible Department. In January, *Jerusalem Post* journalist Rossella Tercatin wrote an article featuring Professor Berman's approach to this age-old topic. "According to Prof. Joshua Berman ... some of his colleagues are making a fundamental mistake: They are looking for evidence of the Exodus in Egypt, *instead of looking for marks of Egyptian culture in the Torah, the five books of Moses*" (emphasis added throughout).

The benefits of taking this fascinating approach go beyond just proving Israel's presence in Egypt. Answering this question provides insight into exactly *when* the Torah was written, an issue at the heart of its credibility as both a historic and theological document.

For the last several centuries, one of the prevailing theories explaining the composition of the Hebrew Bible has been the "Documentary Hypothesis," or some derivation of it. This view holds that the Torah—the first five books of the Bible—was not written during the middle-second millennium B.C.E., the Mosaic date affirmed by internal biblical chronology and thus held by biblical traditionalists and literalists. Proponents of this revised, minimalist school of thought believe the Torah is the product of Jewish authors writing sometime in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E.. They claim much of the Torah was composed just prior to Jerusalem's fall in the early sixth century B.C.E., and that it was significantly modified much later, even as late as the Hellenistic period.

But what does the language of the Torah tell us? What if the words and phrases used within the "books of Moses" reflect an accurate, perhaps even eyewitness, account of Egypt as it was in the mid-to-late second millennium—generally known as the New Kingdom period, circa 1550–1075 B.C.E.? Are there etymological clues proving the author (Moses) experienced the events and culture he recorded?

Or does evidence suggest the author or authors were far removed from New Kingdom period Egypt, with only a hazy understanding of early Egypt's language and culture?

According to Professor Berman, "The Torah is infused with Egyptian culture and its response to it.

What I find incredibly fascinating is how familiar the Torah is with Egyptian culture, suggesting that the Israelites were indeed in Egypt, and they were there for a long time" (ibid).

Let's consider some of the evidence of "Egypt in Israel"—Egypt in the Torah.

Phraseology

One key element we can look at is certain phraseology in the Torah. Take Deuteronomy 5:15: Here Moses tells the Israelites, "Remember that thou was a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God brought thee out thence *by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm*"

These terms, *a mighty hand* and *an outstretched arm*, are used numerous times throughout the Hebrew Bible—but always in the context of the Exodus. Professor Berman points out the significance of this: "The Bible could have employed that phrase to describe a whole host of divine acts on Israel's behalf, and yet the phrase is used *only* with reference to the Exodus. This is no accident" (ibid).

There is a fascinating historical reason this phrase is only associated with the Exodus. It's actually a unique pharaonic "victory" expression—*one common during Egypt's New Kingdom period*.

Prof. James Hoffmeier, an Old Testament scholar and Egyptologist, writes: "It is not until the Middle Kingdom (1700–1800 B.C.E.) that we begin to see expressions related to the *conquering arm* of pharaoh appearing [This] continues with even greater frequency in the New Kingdom" (*The Arm of God Versus the Arm of Pharaoh in the Exodus Narratives*).

In Egyptian records, pharaohs Thutmose II and IV are named the "Mighty of Arm." Senusret I is lauded in the "Hymn of Sinuhe" for "strong arm ... a champion [with]

arm outstretched." Relief representations of pharaohs smiting their enemies with their right hand are also common. "In *no other ancient Near Eastern culture* do we encounter such portrayals of the right hand," Berman writes. It is specific to Egypt—and especially Egypt in the *New Kingdom period*. And what do we see in the Torah? This pharaonic phrase turned on its head: It is *God*, by His "outstretched arm," that destroys the *pharaoh*.

Another phrase found often in the Bible is praise for God destroying Israel's enemies *like chaff* (or "stubble," i.e. Exodus 15:7). This saying also appears in New Kingdom period Egypt (specifically, within Ramesses II's Kadesh poem). It is not known in any other Near Eastern text.

Professor Berman has studied closely the Kadesh poem written by Pharaoh Ramesses II following his victory against the Hittites, and its remarkable similarities with the "Song of Victory" recorded in Exodus 15 (after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea). His comparison of the two texts shows that the author of this biblical "song" (Moses) must have been familiar with the courtly, royal language used in Egypt's New Kingdom period.

Historian Craig Davis, in his exhaustive book *Dating the Old Testament*, has made similar observations. In particular, he notes the direct correlation between the entire book of Deuteronomy—Moses's "final address" to the people of Israel—and the second-millennium B.C.E. "suzerainty treaties," of a layout *specific* to the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. Davis compares the layout of Deuteronomy with the treaty between Mursili and



Duppi-Tesub (a 13th-century B.C.E. Hittite treaty) as an example. Both have a near-identical layout: a *preamble, historical background, treaty stipulations, invocation of witnesses, deposition of written copy of treaty, and a conclusion of curses and blessings.*

Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen likewise spends a significant amount of space on this subject in his book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Kitchen sets numerous second-millennium Near East official texts and treaties beside various passages of the Torah. “The origin of the book of Deuteronomy itself *cannot* be dated to the seventh century,” he writes. “Its format is wholly that of the 14th/13th century, on the clear evidence of almost 40 comparable documents.”

Kitchen poses an important question: “[H]ow come documents such as Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy *just happen to embody very closely the framework and order and much of the nature of the contents of such treaties and law collections established by kings and their scribal staffs at court in their respective capital cities in the late second millennium?*” Here is more evidence that the author of the Torah was familiar with the layout of courtly, formal second-millennium treaties.

Geography

Another notable point is that the author of the Torah was familiar with the geography of New Kingdom period Egypt. Moreover, while the author’s descriptions of Egypt’s landmarks are detailed and accurate, he appears to be less familiar with the geography

of the land of Canaan. If the text were composed much later by authors in the land of Judah, we would expect precisely the *opposite*. Instead, the text fits well with a princely *Egyptian*-origin author who was denied entry into the Promised Land at the end of his life (i.e. Numbers 20:12).

“The author of the Torah is familiar with the land of Egypt,” Davis writes. “He is familiar with the reeds in the Nile (Exodus 2:3) and knows that it would be safe to put a child in a basket in that river. ... The author feels a need to explain things in Canaan with reference to things in Egypt.” Deuteronomy 11, for example, highlights the method of *gardening* in Egypt, and how these methods will no longer be necessary in the land of Canaan.

Note the following seemingly arbitrary statements, all of which use Egypt as a reference for otherwise obvious features in the Promised Land. Genesis 13:10 describes a “plain of the Jordan” as being “*like the land of Egypt, as thou goest unto Zoar.*” In Numbers 13:22, the author writes, “And they went up into the South, and came unto Hebron Now *Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.*”

Genesis 33:18 reads, “And Jacob came in peace to the city of *Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan*” It doesn’t make sense for a Jewish author writing in the middle of the first millennium to identify the location of a such a major, well-known city. Yet it makes perfect sense that an author writing from outside Canaan, whose immediate audience was equally unfamiliar with Canaan, might use such language.

What about the central city *Jerusalem*? It is named as such nearly 700 times throughout the Hebrew Bible—yet not *once* in the Torah (despite the fact that this region is mentioned—Genesis 22). Its first mention in this form is in the book of Joshua, during the conquest (Joshua 10:1). Surely late-date writers would not have forgotten to mention such an important Judean city by this name?

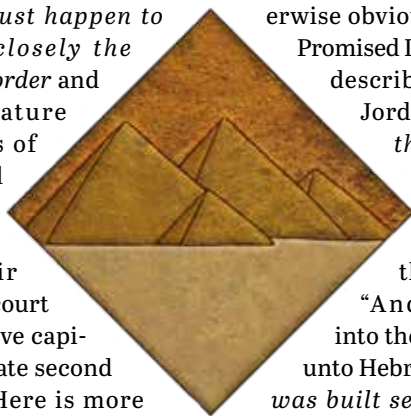
Flora and Fauna

The author of the Torah was also familiar with the *diet* fed to slaves in Egypt. Numbers 11:5 states that the Israelite slaves were fed leeks and onions. Herodotus, the fifth-century B.C.E. Greek historian, wrote in his *Histories* that during a tour of the pyramids, he observed an inscription that stated the workmen were fed *leeks and onions* (2.124).

Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, the “clean and unclean” food chapters of the Torah, identify a number of animal species. Remarkably, *none* are particularly specific or unique to Israel—yet several (including the ostrich, ibex and “wild ox”) are specific and native to Egypt and the Sinai.

The author of the Torah was also familiar with Egyptian *botany*. Acacia wood is mentioned nearly 30 times in the Torah (primarily in the context of building the tabernacle), and only four times in the rest of the Old Testament. This makes sense, as it is a wood native to Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. (In the four times acacia wood *is* mentioned outside the Torah, it is never used to describe the trees existing in Israel.)

Unsurprisingly, the Hebrew word used for this wood is of Egyptian derivation. Not only that, it resembles a very *early* Egyptian spelling (which actually changed during the New Kingdom period).



Hoffmeier writes: “The facts that *shittim* is a word of Egyptian origin and that this tree provides the *only suitable wood for construction use* [while in the wilderness], lends authenticity of this element of the wilderness tradition” (*Israel in Sinai*).

The author of the Torah also appears to have been familiar with Egyptian diseases.

Deuteronomy 28:27 reads:

“The Lord will smite thee with the *botch of Egypt*, and with the emeralds, and with the scab, and with the itch, whereof thou canst not be healed”

(King James Version).

According to 17th-century theologian, linguist and Egyptian expert Johann Vansleb, this “botch of Egypt” was a recurrent disease specific to the seasonal rising of the Nile. First-century C.E. historian Pliny the Elder wrote of an “Elephantiasis” (to which this disease has been linked) that was “originally peculiar to Egypt” and specifically the area of Upper Egypt, home of the native Egyptian dynasty (*Natural History*, 26.5). First-century B.C.E. philosopher Lucretius attributed this disease to the Nile River.

Names (or Lack Thereof)

Finally, consider the etymology of the names of some of the primary figures in the Torah. Many are distinctly Egyptian in origin.

The protagonist of the Torah is *Moses*. This name has long been associated with the common Egyptian name *Mosis* or *Mose*. Egyptian records show this was an important name in royal Egyptian society, and one that appears primarily during the New Kingdom period. In Egyptian, the name *Moses* means “born of” (a meaning

inferred in Exodus 2:10, which describes Moses’s naming). Other New Kingdom figures with the same name include *Tuthmose* or *Tuthmosis* (“born of Tuth”), *Ahmose*, *Amenmose*, *Ramose*, *Kamose*, *Wadjmose*, *Ramesses*, etc. It only makes sense that an Egyptian princess, who was part of a royal dynasty frequently using this name element, would use it for her adopted son.

Then there’s *Aaron*, Moses’s assistant.

The meaning of this name in Hebrew, pronounced *Aharon*, is famously unclear.

However, it is a good parallel to the ancient Egyptian name *Aharo/Aha-rw* (with the added suffix “n”), an Egyptian name that means “lion warrior.”

Moses and Aaron’s sister was named *Miriam*, a name long identified as Egyptian in origin. The initial element, *Meri*, is a common Egyptian one meaning *beloved*, which is followed by an attached theophoric (deity) element—in this case most often presented as *Meri-Amun*, “Beloved of [the god] Amun.”

Things really get interesting with the name *pharaoh*. One of the most frustrating observations about the Exodus story, at least for historians, is the author’s failure to identify Egypt’s pharaohs by name. In fact, the Bible does not begin to identify Egypt’s pharaohs by name until the 10th century B.C.E.

Is this the sign of an ignorant late author? Hardly—especially when considering the incredibly accurate details described above and the fact that access to such historical names would have been simple to acquire.

Yet this phenomenon fits perfectly with New Kingdom period Egypt. As frustrating as it is for 21st-century scholars, this lack of

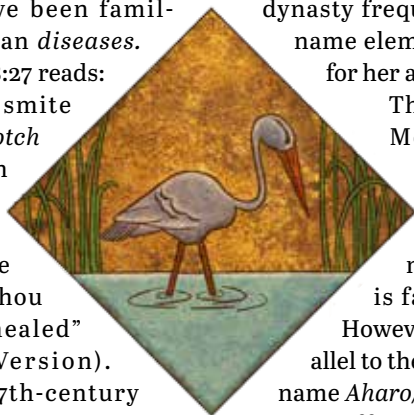
reference to the pharaohs fits with literature of the mid-to-late second millennium B.C.E. Ancient Egyptian records show that while they did have specific names, the primary title used when referring to Egypt’s leaders during this specific period was simply *pharaoh*.

In his book *Israel in Egypt*, Professor Hoffmeier explains in detail how the term *pharaoh* began to be used in the 15th century (beginning with the reign of Thutmose III) and then fell out of use in the 10th century. “By the Ramesside period (1300–1100 B.C.E.), ‘Pharaoh’ is widely used. ... From its inception until the 10th century, the term ‘Pharaoh’ stood alone, without juxtaposed personal name. In subsequent periods, the name of the monarch was generally added on. This precise practice is found in the Old Testament ... suggestive of the period[s] of composition.”

The use of the singular term *pharaoh* for only a relatively short window is helpful when it comes to dating the Torah. If the Torah had been authored by Joseph, for example, we would expect the pharaohs to be named. The same is true if the Torah had been authored on the other side of the “Exodus” and “Judges” periods, perhaps by an Isaiah figure. Yet within this tight mid-to-late second millennium, New Kingdom period, this *simply was not done*—and that is what we see in the biblical account.

For an author trained in Egypt’s royal court (like Moses), such an omission would be expected and habitual. In fact, if the pharaohs *had* been named, this could potentially be taken as evidence *against* the authenticity of the biblical account.

Finally, note the name used to describe God. *YHWH*, the name of the God of Israel, is used over 6,500 times throughout the Hebrew Bible; it is the name used most to refer to



God. It is also notably incorporated as a theophoric name element (i.e. *Jeremiah*, *Hezekiah*). The use of such names is entirely ubiquitous during the monarchical period and beyond, when late-date hypotheses suggest that much of the Torah was written.

Yet when it comes to the Torah, we find something peculiar. Craig Davis writes: “There are *no names in the Torah based on the name YHWH*. ... These Yahwistic [YHWH-based] names became so prominent later that the majority of the kings of Judah and about one third of all male Jews had Yahwistic names.” Davis notes one exception to this — *Joshua* (*Yehoshua*)—an individual whose name was later *changed* from Hoshea.

This lack of YHWH-based names in the Torah—despite the fact that this name *is* used for God throughout the Torah—proves a headache for late-date advocates. Yet the clear reason for this is explained in the Torah itself.

In the account of the burning bush, when God speaks to Moses for the first time, we find the following: “And Moses said unto God: ‘Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them: The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me: *What is His name?* what shall I say unto them?’ And God said unto Moses: ‘*I AM THAT I AM*’ [a Hebrew phrase etymologically related to the name YHWH]; and He said: ‘Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: *I AM* hath sent me unto you.’ ... The Lord [YHWH], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you; this is My name for ever ... I appeared unto

Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, as God Almighty, but *by my name YHWH I made Me not known to them*” (Exodus 3:13-15; 6:3).

The answer for the Torah’s ubiquitous use of this name for God, yet a *lack* of its use as a common personal name element, then, is simple. The name was revealed to Moses, as author, explaining his regular use of this name to refer to God Himself. Yet it wasn’t known to the general populace to this point for them to start incorporating it into personal names. (The above-cited *Haaretz* journalist said a lack of evidence of YHWH-worship by slaves in Egypt is evidence *against* Israelites in Egypt; in reality, this evidence *supports* the biblical account.)

Thus, it’s not just the names that are used in the Torah that serve as evidence for the date of composition, it’s also the names that are *not* used. Take Baal, for example. This Canaanite deity was the scourge of Israel in Canaan—from the judges period and all through the period of the monarchy, even beyond. If the Torah were written during this later, first-millennium B.C.E. time period, it surely would have contained a warning about, or at least hints of, this specific god. Yet there is no mention of Baal, besides a single Canaanite place-name reference, found in the Torah (Numbers 22:41). Why not?

Other common titles, like “Lord of hosts” or “God of hosts,” used nearly 300 times throughout the Bible, are found *nowhere* in the Torah. “Holy One,” used nearly 50 times throughout the Bible, is also nowhere in the Torah. Why not, if the Torah were written by late Jewish writers under the influence of other biblical texts?

The list of Egyptian-influenced names in the Torah goes on. As Prof. Richard Hess explains, several names, “such as Pinhas [Phinehas], show an explicit connection

with Egyptian personal names at the period in question, and a few, including Hebron [Hebron] (Exodus 6:18) and Puah (Exodus 1:15), are attested as personal names *only in the mid-second millennium* (that is, the 18th to the 13th centuries B.C.E.)”

Think about how well educated in Egyptian history an author writing in the first millennium would have had to be to use such names—and so particular to a specific moment in Egyptian history. As Hess writes: “It is one thing to remember a great figure like Moses and perhaps build all sorts of legends around him. It is something else when minor characters and other incidental details that occur but once in the biblical account fit only within the period of Israel’s earliest history and would be unknown to a writer inventing a tradition centuries later.”

We have covered here only a handful of names. There are countless individual words besides, throughout the Torah, that have clear Egyptian derivation. Take, for example, the Exodus 2 account of Moses’s birth: Egyptian-origin words include *basket* (*dbzt*), *bulrushes* (*km3*), *pitch* (*dft*), *reeds* (*twfy*), *river* (*itrw*) and *brink* (*spt*), and are all highlighted in Hoffmeier’s *Israel in Egypt*.

Endless Examples

The examples are almost endless.

The author of the Torah was aware that Egyptian women gave birth “upon the stools,” or *two bricks* or *stones* (Exodus 1:16). Egyptian women would squat or kneel on these stone bricks during delivery. They are mentioned in papyrus texts, and the first example of such a brick was discovered in 2001—dating to the general, relevant period: the mid-second millennium B.C.E.

The Torah also displays a remarkably good understanding



of Egyptian chariotry. Chariots are not mentioned in the Torah prior to the time of Joseph—and indeed, it is just following this time that evidence suggests Egypt began to use the chariot (with the first Egyptian reference of such dating to the 16th century B.C.E.). The Torah reveals that by the time of the Exodus, the pharaoh had a huge force of 600 royal chariots used to pursue the Israelites (Exodus 14). Here again, it was specifically during the *New Kingdom period* that we witness the golden age of Egyptian chariotry. The 13th century B.C.E. Battle of Kadesh, for example, represents the largest chariot battle ever fought: the Egyptians fielding some 2,000 chariots against the Hittites. The dating and even the numbers fielded specifically against the fleeing Israelites in the Exodus account, then, are about right.

Exodus 5 documents the “recipe” for making bricks out of mud and straw. Were late authors of the Torah also experts in New Kingdom period brickmaking? The same method described in Exodus is famously depicted in artwork on a New Kingdom period tomb, which shows foreign slaves accomplishing the backbreaking labor. Exodus 5 also says that the number of individual bricks produced were “tallied,” or counted. Remarkably, the New Kingdom period “Louvre Leather Roll” (circa 1274 B.C.E.) records the tallying of bricks.

Consider all of the polities—nations, cities, regions described throughout the Torah that fit with the status quo of the second millennium B.C.E.—many of which *only* belong to this time period.

Consider many of the peculiar laws, commandments and statutes found throughout the Torah. Many of these strange laws have led to no

end of theories as to their purpose or even relevance. Yet when viewed in light of prevailing Egyptian (and other pagan) culture and customs, *especially* during the second millennium B.C.E., their *raison d'être* becomes clear.

Consider the detailed account of the 10 plagues, “against all the *gods* of Egypt” (Exodus 12:12). Study of these plagues reveals that each was a direct rebuke to various deities in the Egyptian pantheon—again, many of which relate directly to a second-millennium B.C.E. setting (for more on this, see our article “Against All the Gods of Egypt,” ArmstrongInstitute.org/329.)

Finally, consider the simple and obvious fact that many of the later first-millennium B.C.E. books of the Hebrew Bible, such as the Prophets—many of which Torah-minimalists say were written *before* the Torah itself—quote from the Torah. They actually *depend* on the preexistence of the Torah in their overall messages.

The Conclusion of the Whole Matter

The better you understand how much *Egypt* there is in the Torah, so to speak, the harder it is to believe it was written during the first millennium B.C.E. If it were, it would surely represent, in its historic accuracy, one of the finest works of literary fraud conceivable.

We must follow facts and evidence. And the evidence of *Egypt* in Israel—and not just Egypt generally but specifically *New Kingdom period Egypt*—overwhelmingly points to an authentic, contemporaneous, eyewitness authorship. But that's not all. The internal evidence within the Torah indicates it was written not by a slave but by a highly educated, courtly trained individual, who was conversant even in international diplomacy—in other words, a *Moses!*

Sadly, the scientific evidence for this Israelite sojourn, and a Mosaic authorship of the Torah during the late-second millennium B.C.E., will be dismissed by many. Facts and evidence simply aren't important to those who want to redate the Torah's composition to the middle-first millennium B.C.E.

Consider this admission by Julius Wellhausen, the German scholar widely known to be the father of the Documentary Hypothesis: “[I]n the course of a casual visit in Gottingen in the summer of 1867, I learned through Ritschl that Karl Heinrich Graf placed the Law [Torah] later than the Prophets, and, ALMOST WITHOUT KNOWING HIS REASONS FOR THE HYPOTHESIS, I WAS PREPARED TO ACCEPT IT.”

For Bible critics, facts and evidence are much less important than the grand agenda: to destroy the belief that the Torah is the inspired Word of God by recasting it as an epic tale of fiction.

Yet as we have here only briefly covered, this view is categorically false. The facts and evidence are varied, plentiful and totally compelling. *Who*, then, should most logically be identified as the “scribe” of the Torah? *When* was its composition? Evidence for the Exodus events themselves aside, the internal, linguistic data remarkably and consistently establish that the Torah was written during the late second millennium B.C.E.

Psalms 90 is cited as “A Prayer of Moses the man of God.” Its text is remarkably apropos to this subject:

“Their pride [is] but travail and vanity Let THY work appear unto Thy servants, And Thy glory upon their children. ... ESTABLISH THOU ALSO UPON US THE WORK OF OUR HANDS; YEA, THE WORK OF OUR HANDS ESTABLISH THOU IT” (verses 10, 16-17). ■

► **INTERVIEW** FROM PAGE 11

at the outside of it. There's no way we could, with the naked eye, see the inside. [But] we have partnered with a laboratory in Prague that has expertise in scanning through lead and seeing letters. Yes, there do appear to be Hebrew letters. But I want to be cautious. I say "appear" because it is still early. We are still researching. All I can say right now is that we do appear to have Hebrew text and some symbols. Hopefully later this year we will be able to tell people what the text actually says.

BN: If there is an aleph, why might this be a double bonus?

SS: Well, if that's indeed the case, we have the word *ARUR*, the Hebrew word for curse: aleph, resh, resh. That's how the curse formulas come to us in the biblical text. If this is indeed what we have, then it could be that we have a formulaic curse, and Mt. Ebal is the mountain of the curse. For example, "Blessed is the man who honors his father and mother," from Mt. Gerizim. From Mt. Ebal it's "Cursed is the man who doesn't honor his father and mother."

BN: This would be a sensational discovery. We would not only have ancient Hebrew text but text that actually says "curse"—and on the mountain the Bible says Israel rehearsed curses.

SS: That's right.

BN: Tell us about the dumps you excavated. Did all the remains date to Iron I, or did you find later period remains as well?

SS: That is a very good question. Our ceramic analysis was similar to Zertal's, but slightly different. We have about 96 percent of the pottery being Iron I. Then we have about 3.5 percent from the Late Bronze. Then we have less than a percent, less than a half a percent as a matter of fact, that would be early Roman. Now having said that, these [curse] tablets more typically would date to the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Zertal didn't publish much about the Late Bronze pottery. He probably thought it wasn't consequential enough to mention. But I will mention that we found a tiny amount of it. So if you are weighing the ceramic analysis, you would say it's highly likely that you're dealing with something from the Iron Age or the Bronze Age.

BN: I know it's early, but let's assume the curse tablet contains an ancient Hebrew inscription and that it is dated to the Late Bronze or Iron I period. What would that discovery mean?

SS: If it is proto-alphabetic, then you are talking about potentially the earliest Hebrew writing that we have. That is enormous, especially if it appears to be part of recorded Scripture. [If this is the case], then it becomes very difficult for people to argue that the text of Scripture wasn't recorded until the Hellenistic period or slightly before that. But again, this is speculative.

BN: I understand. But what is your sense right now? Based on the lab analysis so far, do you think we will have a good reading of the text inside this amulet?

SS: I hope so. It will come down to the quality of the scans. What we see so far is positive, but there are thousands of scans to be done and a lot of data to be processed, and this takes time. But yes, we are sort of daily now getting new looks at the different levels and angles and what we are seeing is encouraging. But we want to dot every "i" and cross every "t."

BN: Right, I understand. We really want the science to be right. In conclusion, let's talk about another angle of Joshua's conquest. This interview will be printed around the time of Passover. The Bible tells us the Israelites entered the Promised Land around this time period. You have excavated at Ai, Shiloh and now Mount Ebal. How much evidence do we have that supports the biblical record of Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan?

SS: Great question. Remember that Joshua set up the tabernacle in Shiloh (we read this in Joshua 18:1) and lived decades after that point. This is a whole other program for another time, but the evidence of the sacrificial system that we're uncovering there is really staggering. It also goes to that Late Bronze IB and Late Bronze IIA horizon as well ... so I would say verisimilitude. *I think we have a consistency with what we see in the material culture and what we read in the ancient text.* When you take sort of this processualism, regional approach, and get the macro and the micro, and bring them together and juxtapose them—we see at Ai, we see at Shiloh, we see at Mt. Ebal, a consistency of a picture that is beginning to unfold of early Israelite arrival.

I think that we can safely say that, as Passover is celebrated this year, that we are not just dealing with a myth, but we are dealing with reality.

BN: Great! Well, thank you very much and keep up the wonderful work.

SS: Appreciate all that you're doing, Brent. ■

Can You Trust the Masoretic Text?

We should. It's the most accurately copied ancient document in human history.

BY JUDE FLURRY



THE MASORETIC TEXT IS WIDELY ACCEPTED AS THE authoritative text of the Hebrew Bible. It is the basis for the Jewish Publication Society's translation of the Tanakh, as well as most Protestant Christian versions, including the monumental Authorized King James Version of 1611.

However, many scholars today question its accuracy. After all, the Hebrew Bible was originally penned by nearly 40 different authors between the 15th and 5th centuries B.C.E., a period of roughly 1,000 years. That means the oldest books in the canon, the Torah and the book of Job, have been passed down for over 3,000 years—most of that time laboriously copied out by hand.

How do we know that the modern Masoretic Text matches the original writings of the Hebrew prophets and patriarchs? How do we know the Bible has accurately survived its 3,000-year journey?

The answers to these questions have immense impact on the field of archaeology. After all, archaeologists have been using the Bible to interpret their finds for centuries (though this approach has recently fallen out of fashion). If scribal editorializations corrupted the eyewitness accounts in the Bible, that would radically alter our interpretation of literally thousands of archaeological discoveries.

Of course, to Bible believers, there is no controversy. God inspired the Bible; therefore, He must also have ensured its accurate transmission. The Bible itself endorses this view. It explicitly states in hundreds of passages that God inspired the writings of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the other writers. Furthermore, the Christian New Testament even records that “the oracles

of God”—including the Hebrew Bible—were committed to the tribe of Judah for careful preservation.

To these people, the fact that a book could be written by so many different authors over a millennium—and *maintain complete narrative and doctrinal consistency*—proves its divine authorship.

But of course, Bible skeptics don't believe in God. They rely on material evidence alone. Where believers see a miracle, skeptics see only a reason to doubt. *If the Bible were truly assembled by so many people so long ago*, they reason, *surely its text was corrupted or miscopied at some point*. To skeptics, the Bible *couldn't* have been copied perfectly for three millenniums because that would have taken a miracle—and besides, there is not enough material evidence to prove it.

Or is there?

The Burden of Proof

To a certain extent, the skeptics have a point. Not enough manuscripts have survived, especially from the time period of the earliest biblical texts, to prove that every word of the Masoretic manuscripts matches the original text. The Dead Sea Scrolls are the earliest significant biblical manuscript, and these date as early as the third and second centuries B.C.E. A few fragments have survived from much earlier than that (see sidebar, page 28), but nothing large enough to provide a significant standard for textual comparison. The earliest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible is the Leningrad Codex, a document based on the Masoretic Text, but this only dates as early as C.E. 1008.

Does that mean we should assume our modern biblical text is faulty, unreliable and filled with textual

errors compounded over thousands of years of transmission? Not at all.

For starters, demanding enough material evidence to “prove” the Bible’s accurate transmission is unreasonable. It is simply unscientific. No ancient document has ever been held to such a standard. Consider the writings of Greek philosopher Plato (composed between 427 and 347 B.C.E.). Our earliest complete manuscript of Plato’s works was copied roughly 12 centuries *after* the author’s death—around C.E. 900 (though, as with the Hebrew Bible, piecemeal fragments of the texts have been found during the intervening period). Yet no reasonable scholar questions the reliability of modern Platonic text on any significant point. Almost all assume Plato’s works were copied accurately during that 1,200-year gap, despite the fact there is little evidence and no manuscripts to prove it.

And Plato is no outlier. Virtually every work of antiquity has a similar time gap between its original composition and the earliest-surviving, complete manuscript. For Herodotus’s *Histories*, the gap is 1,350 years. For Thucydides’s *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, it is 1,300 years. About 1,200 years separate our earliest manuscript of Aristotle’s works and the death of the author in 322 B.C.E. And for Demosthenes’s speeches, the gap is 1,400 years. Our best documented ancient classic (outside the Bible) is Homer’s *Iliad*. Yet even for this text, the gap between the original composition and the earliest surviving manuscript is 400 years.

For these ancient writings, scholars accept, virtually without proof, that our modern manuscripts are reliable. They accept that these works were copied accurately for centuries. They accept that Plato really wrote *The Republic*, for example, and that our modern text of this work, more or less, matches the original.

In essence, the prevailing philosophy of ancient textual criticism has been this: *A manuscript can be assumed reliable unless proved otherwise*. Why should it be any different for the Bible? To use a different standard for the Bible would be unfair, arbitrary and unscientific.

The Masoretic Text, universally considered the authoritative Hebrew manuscript (in particular for its unparalleled copying rituals, as we will see below), can be assumed reliable unless solid evidence proves otherwise—not the other way around. Disagree with this basic premise, and one must consider not only the Bible, but our entire textual record of the ancient world, unreliable.

With this standard in mind, what does the evidence say? Does it show that the Masoretic Text was copied sloppily, carelessly or by agenda-driven scribes eager to insert their own beliefs into the text? Far from it. In

fact, every indication is that for more than three millennia, the Scriptures were copied carefully, precisely and with scrupulous attention to detail.

Studiously Copied

Consider a few revealing facts about ancient Jewish culture and society. To the Jews, the Old Testament, and especially the Torah (Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible), was far more than a religious document. It was their constitution. It was the political and legal bedrock of their nation.

This was especially true during the postexilic time period. “[S]cattered, leaderless, without a state or any of the normal supportive apparatus provided by their own government, the Jews were forced to find alternative means to preserve their special identity,” writes Paul Johnson in *A History of the Jews*. “So they turned to their writings—their laws, and the records of their past. ... If the individual was responsible for obeying the law, he must know what the law is. So it must not merely be set down and copied, but taught. ... The laws were now studied, read aloud and *memorized*.”

Even a cursory reading of the Torah shows how all-encompassing the law was. It regulated virtually every aspect of life. It dictated business practices and family life; it determined dress and diet, the way servants were to be treated, and the way children were to be raised.

Thousands of life-and-death legal cases turned on the minutest nuances of scriptural phraseology. To the ancient Jews, editing even one letter of the Hebrew Bible would have been like changing the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution today.

And even more so: The Jewish people anciently were more familiar with the Hebrew Bible than most modern Americans and Britons are with their national documents. American and British people don’t review the Constitution or the English Bill of Rights on a weekly basis. But in ancient times, Jews read the Old Testament aloud in their synagogues *every Sabbath*—a practice mentioned, for example, by first-century historians Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.175) and Philo (*De Somnis* 2.127)—a practice that has continued, thousands of years later, to the present.

Paradoxically, religious factionalism was another powerful preservative of scriptural accuracy. Jewish society was often bitterly divided over different interpretations of the Old Testament. In the lead-up to the first century C.E., the two main religious factions were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They vehemently disagreed on many fundamental religious doctrines, such as the resurrection and the existence of angels.

However, there was one thing they never disagreed on: the text of the Old Testament. There is no record of any dispute about the textual content of the Holy Scriptures. If dozens or hundreds of flawed, mutually contradictory manuscripts were widely accepted at the time, wouldn't these rivaling factions have chosen different variant texts to suit their opposing agendas? But history records nothing of the kind. For centuries, Jewish scholars, religious leaders and sects have disagreed on various issues. But when it comes to the biblical text, there is consensus that the Scriptures themselves are recorded accurately!

The Hebrew Bible was so well known, so heavily relied upon and so often quoted that any copying errors would have been noticed and corrected immediately. Consider this quote from Josephus: "But now as to our forefathers ... they took greater care [in scribal transmission] than the others I spoke of [such as the Greeks] ... they committed that matter to their high priests and to their prophets, and that these records have been written all along down to our own times with the *utmost accuracy*" (emphasis added throughout).

"[E]very one is not permitted of his own accord to be a writer, nor is there any disagreement in what is written; they being only prophets that have written the original and earliest accounts of things as they learned them of God Himself by inspiration; and others have written what hath happened in their own times, and that in a very distinct manner also. ... During so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or

to make any change in them" (*Against Apion*, 1.6-8). This is an unambiguous assertion that the authoritative biblical text was copied accurately from its origin until the first century C.E.

From this time period (the turn of the millennium) forward, more evidence regarding scriptural copying standards begins to emerge. During this time, preserving the Hebrew Bible was one of the many duties of the priests in the temple precincts at Jerusalem. When copying the Scriptures, these men had to follow a multitude of stringent regulations. Kenneth Connolly documented some of these in his book *The Indestructible Book*. The rules included the mandate that each manuscript had to be written on the skins of clean animals; each column of writing could have no more than 60 and no less than 40 lines; the Scriptures were to be written with black ink only, and the ink was made according to a special recipe.

When writing, the scribes were required to speak each word aloud as they wrote it. Additionally, before writing the name of God (YHWH), they were obligated to clean their pens and wash their entire bodies with water.

Once a manuscript was finished, it underwent a scrupulous inspection process. Each manuscript had to be reviewed within 30 days of its completion. If three or more pages contained errors, the entire document was discarded and rewritten. The letters, words and paragraphs were all counted, and if the middle paragraph, word and letter did not correspond with those of the original, the whole document was considered invalid. Additionally, if any two letters in the manuscript

THE EN GEDI SCROLL

Ancient written documents are the holy grail of archaeological discoveries. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran, for example, is arguably the most important archaeological discovery of all time. However, they are not the only ancient biblical scrolls discovered in Israel.

In 1970, archaeologists excavating through the destruction of a synagogue at En Gedi found their own portion of the Bible. Burned to a crisp, the scroll was put aside until the technology was developed to capture its text.

In 2016, with the amazing new digital analysis of X-ray scans, scientists were able to "virtually unwrap" the scroll and read its contents.

Astoundingly, it contained portions of chapters 1 and 2 of the biblical book of Leviticus. But unlike the Dead Sea Scrolls, which based this passage on a Greek translation, the En Gedi scroll was identical to the Masoretic Text. Michael Segal, professor of biblical studies at Hebrew University, worked on the project; he described the scroll as being "letter-to-letter identical to the Masoretic Text that we know from medieval manuscripts.

Similarly, in these two chapters, the section/paragraph divisions are in identical locations to the medieval [Masoretic Text]."

This En Gedi scroll is important because it confirms the Jews' accuracy in exactly preserving the Bible throughout the centuries. Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Emanuel Tov, who participated in the project, said, "This is quite amazing for us. In 2,000 years, this text has not changed." Dr. Ada Yardeni, after analyzing the handwriting of the text, dated it to around the first century C.E.

touched, the whole document was rendered invalid and discarded.

Josephus also went into detail about the careful “scrutiny” of the genealogical records of potential scribes for the Holy Scriptures. The manuscripts of Plato or Herodotus were never copied so meticulously—yet scholars do not question their accuracy. Why hold the Bible to a different standard?

It is not entirely clear when these strict copying practices began. According to Jewish tradition, they

after the invasion and occupation of the Romans, Jewish rabbis started religious schools in both Babylon and the Holy Land. These institutions, called Talmudic Academies, flourished for hundreds of years. The scholars they produced were best known for writing the Mishnah and the Talmud, commentaries on the Torah that modern Jews consider sacred. Rabbis from these schools, which were primarily centered in Tiberias, compiled the Mishnah around C.E. 200 and the Jerusalem Talmud around C.E. 400.



“[W]hat faith we have placed in our own writings is evident by our conduct, for though so long a time has now passed, no one has dared to add anything to them, or alter anything in them.”

—*Flavius Josephus*

started with Moses. It is also possible that many of them were started by the priest and scribe Ezra in the fifth century B.C.E. Ezra is considered to be the founder of modern Judaism and is often referred to as a “second Moses” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The Hebrew Bible calls Ezra “a ready scribe in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6). So it would make sense that he established many of the scribal standards for use in the temple.

Of course, people of faith believe Moses, Ezra and the other authors were merely scribes in God’s hand and that He is ultimately the Author and responsible for the accuracy of the Bible. But even if one rejects this view, it is undeniable that by the first century C.E., strict standards ensuring accurate scriptural transmission were enforced at the temple—and likely had been for hundreds of years (note Paul Johnson’s *A History of the Jews*).

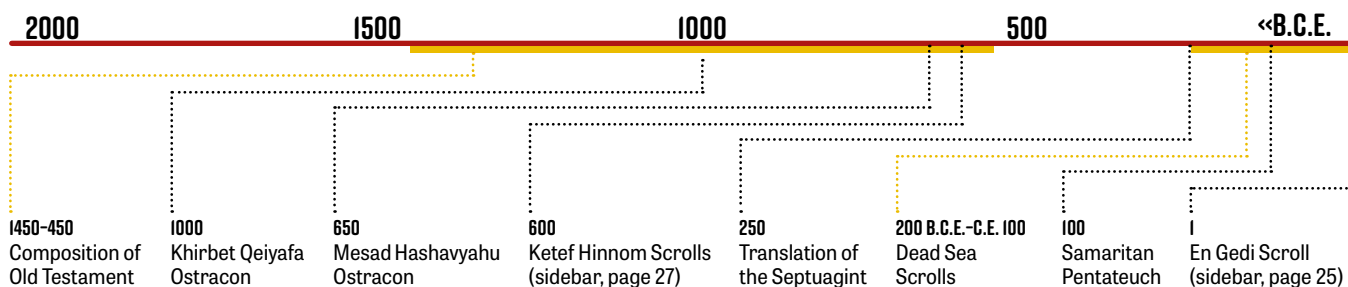
These meticulous copying practices didn’t cease after the destruction of the temple in C.E. 70. Shortly

About a century later, rabbis of the Babylonian academies completed their own Talmud, which most modern Jews consider authoritative. Both academies continued to study and write about the Bible for hundreds of years. In fact, they were both still active as late as the 10th century C.E.

It almost goes without saying that these Talmudic academies, so intent on scrutinizing and dissecting the nuances of not only every word but every *letter* of the Hebrew Bible, also took great pains to preserve the literal text of the Scriptures. Scholars of the Tiberias school especially took this task seriously. One measure they took to ensure accurate transmission was adding vowel markings to the biblical text.

Hebrew is a consonantal language, meaning vowels are understood but not written. For example, if English were a consonantal language, the word “manuscript” would be written “mnscrip,” and readers would have to mentally fill in the vowel sounds.

TIMELINE: COMPOSITION OF THE BIBLE



To prevent misunderstandings of the Scriptures, the scholars in Tiberias added small markings above and below the letters of the text to indicate which vowels should be used.

This process took place over several centuries. The scribes also devised an elaborate system of marginal notes called “Massorah,” which were transcribed into each new manuscript. The Massorah did not include thoughts or commentary on the meaning of the Scriptures. Instead, they recorded facts and statistics about each book of the Bible: the number of letters and the middle letter, the number of verses and the middle verse, the number of times a certain group of letters or words appeared, and so on. In short, the Massorah locked each letter and word of the Bible firmly in place, virtually guaranteeing accurate transmission. For this reason, the Massorah has been called “a fence to the Scriptures.”

Because of their work on the Massorah, the scholars in Tiberias earned the name “Masoretes” or “Masorites,” and the authoritative biblical text they produced (work that spanned a 500-year window, from the fifth to 10th centuries C.E.) was called the Masoretic Text. The earliest and latest Masoretic manuscripts match one another with a degree of precision that still astonishes scholars.

The Masoretic Text should be regarded as the *most accurately copied manuscript in human history*. Has any other book from antiquity formed the political, religious and legal core of a whole nation? Was a death sentence ever issued on the basis of a single turn of phrase from Homer’s *Iliad*? Has anyone bothered to count the letters of Plato’s *Republic*, calculate the middle word of Herodotus’s *Histories*, or wash his entire body before writing the name of Socrates?

Josephus wrote about the exactness of his people when dealing with the Bible. “[Our people have been] seen to endure racks and deaths of all kinds upon the theaters, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws and the records that contain them;

whereas there are none at all among the Greeks who would undergo the least harm on that account” (op cit).

Evidence indicates that the Bible was transmitted far more meticulously, carefully and accurately than any other ancient book!

What About Textual Inconsistencies?

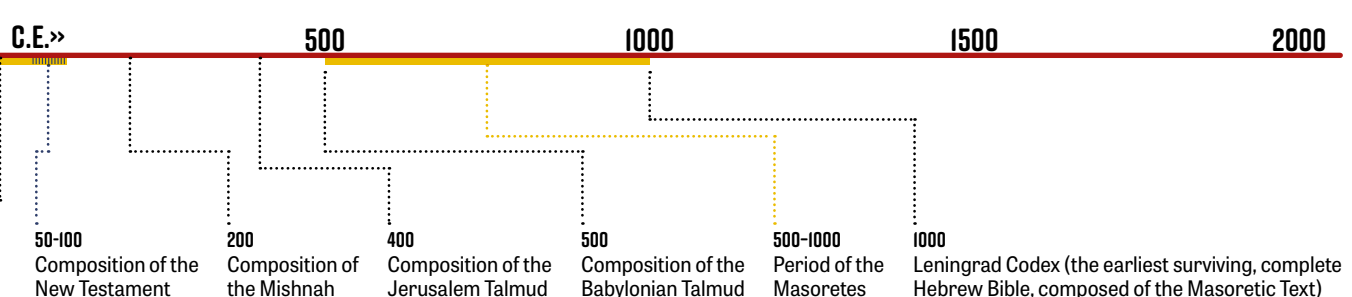
Scholars who dispute this fact often point to discrepancies between certain different biblical manuscripts. For example, our oldest significant set of manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls (written between the third century B.C.E. and the first century C.E.), while in large part paralleling the Masoretic Text, contain several alternate readings.

Another manuscript, the Samaritan Pentateuch (the earliest complete example of which dates to the 12th century C.E.) notably describes God thundering the Ten Commandments from Mt. Gerizim (the holy mountain of the Samaritan community) instead of Mt. Sinai, among other differences. Skeptics believe these differences show corruption of the biblical text over thousands of years.

But there is a logical explanation for these discrepancies: The scribal professionalism and diligence detailed above was not universal. The scrupulous copying standards were enforced *only by Jewish authority centered in the temple at Jerusalem*. It is only after the C.E. 70 destruction of Jerusalem that that authority was forced to migrate elsewhere (i.e. in Tiberias).

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* notes that while a central canonical text existed at least as early as the second century B.C.E., “it took centuries to produce a tolerable uniformity among all the circulating copies. This is by no means astonishing when one considers that *the standard copy deposited at the temple could be of benefit only to those who were sufficiently near Jerusalem to make use of it*. This was not the case with those living in the Diaspora.”

Jews were scattered all over the world after they went into Babylonian captivity in the early sixth



century B.C.E. Without access to the highly trained scribes or authoritative manuscripts at the temple, many errors undoubtedly crept into the manuscripts made in fringe communities.

Josephus corroborated this claim, writing that in some places the Scriptures during and before the third century B.C.E. were “transcribed more carelessly than they ought to have been.”

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a good example of this carelessness. They were discovered in Qumran, a town located about 20 miles east of Jerusalem. Along with the many fragments, archaeologists found several apocryphal and pseudepigraphal manuscripts—spurious biblical texts that were not part of the original canon. They also found the earliest, nearly complete copy of the book of Isaiah. According to Emanuel Tov, a scholar at Hebrew University, the Isaiah scroll is “a classroom example of what an inferior text looks like, with its manifold contextual changes, harmonizations, grammatical adaptations, etc.”

All this evidence suggests serious corruption in the textual tradition of Qumran—not to mention this community represents an esoteric, fringe sect of monastic Jews with beliefs considered highly peculiar to Judaism at the time. There are similar problems with manuscripts from other locations, such as the Samaritan Pentateuch (a Torah variant designed in deliberate conflict with the Jewish people—an ideological clash noted throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament—i.e. 2 Kings 17; Ezra 4; John 4).

Imagine reading a copy of the *Iliad* written by a Greek university student living in Alexandria in the fourth century. His recording is likely to differ, probably substantially, from the copy made by a trained scribe working within established guidelines at a university in Athens. Would the inconsistencies or errors introduced by the novice copyist undermine the work of the professional? Of course not.

It's the same with the Bible. The presence of flawed copies produced by untrained, inexperienced scribes

THE KETEF-HINNOM SCROLLS

In a 1979 excavation on the edge of the Hinnom Valley in Jerusalem, a First Temple period tomb containing over 1,000 objects was discovered by Prof. Gabriel Barkay and his team. Among the manifold artifacts were two tightly wrapped silver scrolls, so fragile that two museums declined the opportunity to try to open them. When conservators at the Israel Museum at last managed to unroll the objects (an incredibly slow, three-year process), they were stunned to find preserved verses from the Torah—passages from what we know today as Numbers 6 and Deuteronomy 7.

The circa 600 B.C.E. miniature silver scrolls, measuring no more than 10 centimeters long by 3 centimeters wide (unrolled), are amulets containing various “blessing” texts. Included on one scroll were passages from Deuteronomy 7:9 and Numbers 6:24-25, and on the other, the same Numbers 6 passage, albeit slightly longer—verses 24-26.

The scrolls are somewhat fragmentary and damaged along

the edges. Still, the approximately 70 preserved Hebrew letters that relate to these biblical passages can be read clearly. And remarkably, they are virtually identical to the Masoretic Text—over 1,000 years before the advent of the Masoretes.

For the passages in question, the only difference between the Masoretic Text and the silver scrolls is just two letters. (Namely, an “and” and a “to”—these words are represented by single letters in Hebrew that are missing on the Ketef Hinnom scrolls.) And this two-letter difference is debatable, given the damage to the scrolls. It is also important to note that the Ketef Hinnom scrolls, of their own right, were clearly not intended to be a careful scribal perpetuation of Scripture. Rather, they were personal amulets, or charms (and of minuscule size, perhaps also explaining the omission of the letters on the scrolls).

Such a tiny amount of potential variation is itself impressive, but what is likewise notable with this discovery is that there is more letter

variation between the text of the Ketef Hinnom scrolls and the Samaritan Pentateuch—a Torah variant believed to originate in the first century B.C.E.—than there is with the later Masoretic Text.

Despite the limited amount of text preserved on these amulets, this shows the superiority of the Masoretic Text as accurate to the original Scriptures used during the First Temple period—even before the time of Ezra and his scribal traditions—right back into the time of the Judahite monarchy. The discovery has been aptly named “one of most significant discoveries ever made for biblical studies.”

Text Preserved on the Amulets:

“[The faithful God, who] keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep [His commandments].” (Deuteronomy 7:9)

“[The Lord] bless thee, and keep thee; The Lord make His face to shine upon thee ... and give thee peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

does nothing to undermine the texts copied by the professional scribes divinely entrusted with safekeeping and transmission (i.e. Deuteronomy 17:18).

Taking all this into account, the Masoretic Text should not be considered unreliable because it contradicts certain older extant manuscripts. Since plenty of evidence attests to the unimpeachability of its scribal tradition, the Masoretic Text should be the standard of comparison. We should compare these manuscripts to the Masoretic Text, and not the other way around. Further, certain very early discoveries *have* been emerging over the past several decades, including the “earliest Scriptures” ever discovered, corroborating specifically the *Masoretic* version of text! (see the sidebars relating to both the En Gedi and Ketef Hinnom scrolls).

While detractors often point out how improbable it is that the Hebrew Bible survived its 3,500-year journey, the reality is pretty remarkable. Skeptics love to point out discrepancies between biblical manuscripts, muddying the water but proving nothing.

But this is not new. Two thousand years ago, Josephus himself addressed “the vanity of those that profess” doubt and skepticism about the Bible. Writing about the detractors in his day, Josephus noted that they form views about events and details “wherein they were not present, nor had concern enough to inform themselves about them from those that knew them.” These skeptics, he wrote, “put a few things together by hearsay, and insolently abuse the world” (*Against Apion*, Book 1.8-11).

Just because *some* biblical manuscripts were copied carelessly or incorrectly, doesn’t mean all of them were. Skeptical claims may be fashionable, but they must be backed by solid evidence to merit consideration.

Meanwhile, there *is* evidence demonstrating just how vigilant and pedantic the ancient Jewish scribes were when copying the Bible. When you consider this evidence, the fact that the Masoretic Text is trustworthy and accurate is entirely unremarkable. When you consider the work ethic and diligence of the ancient scribes and the extreme measures implemented to guarantee accurate copying, how could it not be?

Did God inspire the writing of the Bible and guarantee its accurate preservation over millennia? This is a question each must personally study and answer. But no matter how you answer the question, the accuracy of the Masoretic Text is truly astonishing.

The truth is, we can have more confidence in the Masoretic Text than we do in the texts of Plato, Herodotus or Aristotle. The next time you read the Hebrew Bible, remember: You are reading the most accurately copied ancient document in human history! ■

FEEDBACK

I really do enjoy and am very thankful for the work that you all do. I get your e-mails and watch and listen to your podcasts. You really open up the Bible! Thank you

Tish Tschann OHIO, UNITED STATES

I am happy to let you know that I have received my first printed edition of *Let the Stones Speak* magazine! I am keen on Israel's biblical history and archaeology. Warm wishes for success in your noble endeavor!

Efrian Yordanov Krishkov BULGARIA

IN RESPONSE TO
“OUR INSTITUTE EMBLEM”

This was an inspiring read (ArmstrongInstitute.org/657). Keep up the great work you have continually done keeping Herbert W. Armstrong's legacy moving forward, never faltering.

Delrena Peralta COLORADO, UNITED STATES

IN RESPONSE TO
PODCAST: “BIBLICAL PROPHETS AMOS AND JEREMIAH PROVED CORRECT ON PHILISTINE ORIGINS”

Poignant and quite professionally done (ArmstrongInstitute.org/670), as I would expect from you, Brent. Thank you!

Doug Lackner NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

IN RESPONSE TO
PODCAST: “PROF. YOSEF GARFINKEL AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE JERUBBAAL (GIDEON) INSCRIPTION”

Want to say thank you for your channel. It's so good to have information from Israel (ArmstrongInstitute.org/655).

André Guedes Nina BRAZIL

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