

LET THE STONES SPEAK

The magazine of the
ARMSTRONG INSTITUTE OF BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY



JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2025



Uncovering
SODOM



FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR | BRAD MACDONALD

Another Year of

2024 WAS AN EXCITING AND PRODUCTIVE year for the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology (AIBA). We continued our work of promoting Israel's archaeology through our bimonthly magazine, regular podcasts, website articles and excavations. We also took on some important new ventures—something we look forward to doing more of in 2025.

It was also a difficult year. Like every family and community in Israel, we felt the effects of the horrific Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack and resulting war. While our experience hasn't been as heartbreaking as that of our Israeli friends, it has been personal. Our institute receives a lot of support from Herbert W. Armstrong College in the United States, and a good deal of our work

is done by U.S.-based employees, but we are *intimately* connected to events and people in Israel.

AIBA's headquarters is in Jerusalem, where we have two full-time employees: Christopher Eames and Nicholas Irwin (each of whom has a wife and two young children). These men and their families (as did Brent Nagtegaal and his family before returning to the U.S. ahead of our exhibit) willingly stayed in Jerusalem after October 7 and throughout 2024. Having employees in Israel allows us to experience Israel's archaeology up close and personal. We are able to visit the sites we write about, work with our colleagues at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in studying finds from our own excavations, and speak face to face with archaeologists, scholars and others in the field.

For all of us here at AIBA, and especially Chris and Nick, this is more than a job. The people and institutions we work with in Israel are more than colleagues. They are friends. In many cases, they feel like family—and when one member of the family hurts, we all hurt.

But as difficult as it has been, the past 15 months haven't been entirely negative. It has been inspiring to watch Israelis unite to conquer evil and to witness and experience the courage, resolve and sacrifice of the Jewish people as they rekindle the "lion of Judah" spirit. The events of the past 15 months have only served to strengthen our love for Israel, for its history (biblical and otherwise) and its place in the world. We believe Israel's biblical history is *more important now* than it ever has been!

Zachi Dvira, codirector of the Temple Mount Sifting Project and a friend of our staff, recently explained the importance of archaeology, even in this time of war: "Over the past year, as the State of Israel has been engaged in a war that many have described as existential, each day has brought new casualties among our soldiers, and hundreds of our brothers and sisters remain in captivity in Hamas's dungeons. In such a reality, it is incredibly difficult to speak about or capture the public's interest in matters related to pottery sherds, ancient artifacts and distant history. Archaeology often

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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Another Year of Growth!

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Growth!

As another calendar year ends, we're encouraged by the growth and motivated to jump into what will be our most important year yet.

feels like a luxury reserved for times of peace. HOWEVER, IN ISRAEL, ARCHAEOLOGY IS NO LESS EXISTENTIAL THAN SECURITY MATTERS. Yigal Allon famously said: 'A NATION THAT DOES NOT KNOW ITS PAST HAS A MEAGER PRESENT AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE.'

"It is commonly understood that a nation cannot move toward a shared vision without knowing its roots in the past. But it is not enough to understand history intellectually; we must connect to it tangibly, and there is no better means for this connection than archaeology" (emphasis mine).

We couldn't agree more. This is why we kept Chris and Nick, and their families, in Jerusalem. And this is why, even as the challenges persist, we will continue to devote significant resources to our goal of sharing Israel's biblical archaeology and all of the hope and lessons it bears.

Another Successful Exhibit

2024 got off to a momentous start. On February 25, we opened the doors to our third exhibit at Armstrong Auditorium in Edmond, Oklahoma: "Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered." At the time, *Let the Stones Speak* editor in chief Gerald Flurry said this exhibit would be "the most important we have ever hosted." This has certainly been the case.

One reason this particular exhibit is so important is that it is so *unique*. We have brought together all of the historical and scientific evidence of David and Solomon's monumental kingdom. There is more archaeological evidence attesting to the biblical account of Israel's early monarchy than most people know, much of it uncovered only in the past one or two decades. And this exhibit is really the only place on Earth where all of this remarkable material is presented as one story.

Nearly 12,000 people have visited the exhibit. This is more than either of our two previous exhibits, and we are on track to welcome more visitors than both previous exhibits combined. We have been pleasantly surprised by how far people have traveled to visit us. More than 65 percent of visitors come from *outside* the

local area (Edmond and Oklahoma City)—33 percent of visitors come from outside the state! We've had visitors from 17 different countries, including Japan, the Netherlands, Nigeria and France. We've even had filmmakers and podcasters visit the exhibit and produce programs, including media personalities from Hungary and Brazil, as well as from within the U.S. We're also encouraged by the fact that more than 20 percent of visitors come at the recommendation of friends and family.

The highlight of the exhibit was the incredible opportunity to host the most important artifact in biblical archaeology: the Tel Dan Stele. This was an opportunity we never thought possible. Together with the Dead Sea Scrolls, this inscription is Israel's most valuable and important artifact. This was only the second time the stele has ever come to America. We still can't believe we were able to display it as part of our exhibit. It was so special to see visitors stand in awe before the most powerful evidence there is (outside of the Bible) of King David and the "House of David." On behalf of Armstrong, as well as all those who saw the stele, we want to once again extend our gratitude to Israel Museum—Jerusalem (IMJ) and the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) for loaning us this artifact; and to the Jewish Museum in New York City for helping us sponsor this tour.

The exhibit was originally scheduled to end in January 2025. However, the IMJ and IAA have kindly approved an extension until the end of April. If you haven't done so already and are able, I encourage you to visit our exhibit either in person or online (see *exhibit-tour*. ArmstrongInstitute.org for the virtual tour).

Special Issue

To go along with the exhibit, we produced a special issue of *Let the Stones Speak* devoted solely to the archaeology of David and Solomon's monumental kingdom. Over three times longer than our typical issue, this 130-page, full-color magazine is essentially the exhibit in print. This too is completely original. A lot of books and articles have been written on Israel's united monarchy, but there isn't one that collects all of the new textual



Patrons admire a model of Solomonic Jerusalem during the opening weekend of the “Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered” exhibit.

and scientific evidence together into a single visually appealing and engaging account. One reader from Israel called the publication “a monumental contribution to the literature of this order—an exceptionally amazing intellectual effort that must find its way to every municipal and school library.”

We have given this free “book”—it is more like a book than a magazine—to more than 15,000 people, and we hope to give it to many more. If you haven’t received your free copy, please e-mail letters@ArmstrongInstitute.org.

We did something else really wonderful with this special issue. We translated it into Hebrew! This is the first time we have produced literature in Hebrew, and it was a challenging and ambitious task. But thanks to the editorial help of some of our friends in Jerusalem, especially Dr. Viviana Moscovich, our friends in Israel can now read about their greatest king *in their own language!*

We currently have almost 5,000 Hebrew-language copies of this special issue at our office in Jerusalem. If you have friends and family in Israel who you think might enjoy this magazine in Hebrew, they can request the first issue by e-mailing requestIL@ArmstrongInstitute.org.

This was only the beginning of our efforts to publish in the Hebrew language. We recently made changes to ArmstrongInstitute.org to make it a hybrid website, capable of publishing articles in both English and Hebrew. We already have some articles in Hebrew on

the site and plan to consistently post Hebrew-language articles. To see our Hebrew-language content, visit ArmstrongInstitute.org/more/Hebrew.

Excavating Jerusalem

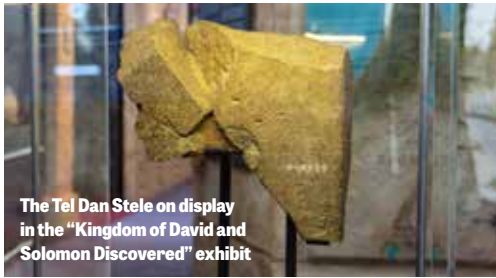
Between August and September 2024, under the direction of Prof. Uzi Leibner and Dr. Orit Peleg-Barkat, nine of our students from Herbert W. Armstrong College and six of our staff members continued our excavations at the Ophel. This was our ninth excavation in Jerusalem and our seventh at the Ophel.

It was a unique season of excavation with the ongoing war in the region, which contributed to the later start date. Once it began, however, our dig was able to move forward undeterred.

If you would like to see some of the highlights of this year’s excavation, you can visit our blog at ArmstrongInstitute.org/1106. For a more in-depth update on the season, read our September-October 2024 issue, “Excavating in Times of War.”

Positive Numbers

AIBA’s reach has grown dramatically over the years—and 2024 was no exception. The first issue of *Let the Stones Speak*, January-February 2022, went to 1,435 subscribers. By the end of that year, the November-December issue went to 2,868 subscribers. That number increased dramatically by the end of 2023, with a circulation of



The Tel Dan Stele on display in the “Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered” exhibit



2024 Ophel excavators



Exhibit edition of *Let the Stones Speak* in English and Hebrew

8,462. Our first year brought incredible growth, and this hasn't slowed.

Our November-December 2024 issue went to 11,625 subscribers in 85 different countries—that is our largest circulation to date! To continue being a part of our thousands of subscribers, be sure you are renewing your subscription when you are notified.

Our YouTube channel has experienced similar growth. Our *Let the Stones Speak* podcast had roughly 2,000 subscribers in 2022 and had jumped to 20,000 subscribers by the end of 2023. Today we have 36,000 subscribers. Our videos regularly get thousands of views. Our most popular video, “Is This Moses?”, was posted in May 2024; it received 30,000 views in the first day and now has over 415,000 views.

Our website receives consistent and heavy traffic with many articles receiving tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands of views. But it's not all about clicks. One of the most encouraging statistics is the one related to engagement time: On average, visitors to the website spend around 4 minutes per page, which, by industry standards, is excellent. We are curious to see what happens to website traffic now that the site offers articles in Hebrew.

Looking Ahead

Like 2024, this coming year will be packed with projects. For over a year, we have been working with various partners, including the Israel Antiquities Authority,

the Berkman-Mintz family, Hebrew University, East Jerusalem Development Ltd. and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, to explore ways to develop the Ophel area of Jerusalem to showcase its crucial and inspiring history and share it with visitors.

What is the Ophel? The Ophel area is situated adjacent north of the City of David and southeast of the Temple Mount and forms the heart of ancient Jerusalem. According to the biblical text and as archaeological evidence increasingly suggests, this area was first developed by King Solomon and was home to Judah's kings, prophets and priests right up until 586 B.C.E., when the city was destroyed by the Babylonians. Some of the most epic events in Jerusalem's history occurred on the Ophel.

Much of this history has been revealed over the years by archaeological excavation, especially by the late Dr. Eilat Mazar. Dr. Mazar, together with Armstrong, uncovered several sensational Ophel artifacts, including monumental structures (evidence of a monumental kingdom), the seal of Judah's King Hezekiah (and the Prophet Isaiah) and a large assemblage of stunning gold coins (or what Dr. Mazar called, “the Ophel treasure”).

Our goal is to bring this crucial history to life—with signs, additional paths and other infrastructure, and state-of-the-art technology—and to open this amazing site to visitors.

Phase 1, which we hope will begin as early as March, is especially exciting. This phase will focus on restoring the archaeological remains of Iron Age Jerusalem, including remains associated with King Solomon. When completed, the Ophel park will give visitors the opportunity to experience the world of some of Judah's greatest kings, priests and prophets.

In future issues we will provide more details about this exciting development, including information on how you can help support the project.

This summer we will also be back at the Ophel for another excavation with Professor Leibner, Dr. Peleg-Barkat and Hebrew University. This phase will run through the month of July. This dig will be slightly larger, as we will be opening a new area of excavation, in addition to continuing where we excavated in 2024. As always, you will be able to follow the day-to-day activities of the dig by reading our blog at ArmstrongInstitute.org.

We are also looking at possibly bringing the “Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered” archaeology exhibit to Israel. Having the exhibit in Edmond, Oklahoma, has been really special. We have been able to share some extraordinary artifacts and the life and history of King David with thousands of people in America. But it would be truly special to take the exhibit to Israel and share

SEE 2024
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TOP 10 BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY DISCOVERIES OF 2024

10. HALLUCINOGENIC PLANTS IN PHILISTINE TEMPLES

In February 2024, Bar-Ilan University researchers published a report on discoveries of various plants used in Philistine temples, including hallucinogenic plants. The report focused on two temples discovered at Tell es-Safi—biblical Gath—constructed in the 10th and ninth centuries B.C.E. and destroyed around 830 B.C.E.

Over 2,000 samples of burned seeds and fruits were collected and tested. They derived from plants like the chaste tree—an aphrodisiac and anesthetic—and the poison darnel—a hallucinogenic fungi containing LSD alkaloids. The researchers concluded that for the Philistine worshipers, “it is plausible that temple ritual praxis included the use of medicinal and mood-enhancing additions to regular foods.” Although the Bible does not explicitly say anything about the Philistines consuming hallucinogenic drugs, Isaiah 2:6 does condemn their religious “soothsayers” (עֲנִיִּים), a Hebrew word etymologically linked to the word for “clouds,” thus perhaps hinting at how one became a Philistine soothsayer—through the ritual inhalation of hallucinogenic substances.

For more on this discovery, check out our article “Hallucinogenic Plants Discovered in Temples at Gath” ([ArmstrongInstitute.org/1037](https://armstronginstitute.org/1037)).

From the biggest of shipwrecks to the smallest of pendants—here’s our list of 2024’s greatest hits in biblical archaeology.

BY ARMSTRONG INSTITUTE STAFF

IN THE WORLD OF BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY, every year brings new discoveries that illustrate, sometimes transform, but always inform our view of the past. And in spite of the tumultuous events in the land of the Bible, 2024 has been no exception. Here is our list of top 10 discoveries in biblical archaeology for the past calendar year.



See our video on the top 10 finds.
[ARMSTRONGINSTITUTE.ORG/1159](https://armstronginstitute.org/1159)



Poison Darnel





Cave of the Skulls
textile fragment

9.

PATRIARCHAL PERIOD INSECT DYES

On July 13, 2024, joint researchers from Bar-Ilan University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem published a report on a 3,800-year-old textile from the Cave of the Skulls. When it was uncovered in 2016, researchers were struck by the vibrant red color of the fabric. It turns out this red was unique: Though most ancient red dyes were produced from a plant root; this dye was produced from a scale insect (sometimes referred to as “scarlet worms”). The use of scale insect dyes is mentioned dozens of times in the Bible, including in early contexts, such as for the tabernacle drapery (e.g. Exodus 26:1; see also Genesis 38:28 for a case relating to the sons of Judah).

Of further significance is the fact that, though some scale insects are native to Israel, this particular dye comes from a species found west of Israel, inhabiting regions that include “Spain, France and other areas.” This fragment, then, shows remarkable evidence of wide trade connections across the Mediterranean during such an early period (the Middle Bronze Age).

For more on this discovery, read our article “Earliest Evidence of Red-Dye Textile Discovered in Judean Cave” (ArmstrongInstitute.org/1086).



8.

DEEP-SEA SHIPWRECK

The discovery of the “earliest ship ever found in the deep seas” was announced in June as “history-changing.” The 3,300-year-old, roughly 13-meter-long ship was found submerged 90 kilometers from Israel’s coast—farther out at sea than any other Mediterranean shipwreck from that period. The head of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) Marine Unit Jacob Sharvit said: “The discovery of this boat now changes our entire understanding of ancient mariner abilities: It is the very first to be found at such a great distance with no line of sight to any landmass.”

The hull of the shipwreck contains hundreds of Late Bronze Age amphorae. So far, only a small representative number of the vessels have been brought to the surface and await comprehensive research, analysis and publication.

For more on this discovery, check out our article “Earliest Deep-sea Shipwreck Ever Discovered Found Off Israel’s Coast” (ArmstrongInstitute.org/1078).



Dr. Bahartan and
Jacob Sharvit with
the ancient jars



Tel Dan Stele

7.

REARRANGING THE TEL DAN STELE

The Tel Dan Stele, or House of David inscription, is arguably the single most prized artifact in the world of biblical archaeology. This automatically makes any significant contribution toward the understanding of it worthy of a top 10 position.

In 2024, Prof. Michael Langlois—following his research of the parallel “David” inscription on the Mesha Stele—turned his attention to the Tel Dan. Utilizing the same digital imaging techniques used on the Mesha Stele (RTI—reflectance transformation imaging), Langlois completed a full comparative letter-by-letter analysis of the three fragments of the stele, determining that they have been pieced together erroneously.

All three fragments—A (right), B1 and B2 (left, upper and lower)—are part of the same stele, and based on paleomagnetic analyses, it can be concluded that they are from the same side of the same stele. The issue is that while the script style is identical between fragments B1 and B2, it is noticeably different for A—showing that the A and B pieces do not go side by side, but probably belong to more separated upper and lower portions of the original stele. Langlois identifies the difference in style as either a sign of the work of two different scribes or a single scribe’s style changing based on working at different angles on different parts of the inscription. Whatever the case, it’s apparent that the pieces do not go side-by-side. (None of this changes the interpretation of the key phrase found in the inscription, “House of David,” which is squarely within fragment A.)

Langlois’s report is published in the latest *Israel Exploration Journal* (Vol. 74, No. 2). For more on this research, read our article “Has the Tel Dan Stele Been Reconstructed Incorrectly? New Research Suggests Yes” (ArmstrongInstitute.org/1143).

6.

WHAT *Mmst* MUST MEAN ...

The *lmlk* “to the king” pottery handle inscriptions from the late eighth century B.C.E. are well known; examples number in the thousands. The First Temple Period Judean inscriptions, generally attributed to the reign of King Hezekiah and his siege preparations in advance of Sennacherib’s Assyria invasion, typically bear one of four different inscriptions: Hebron, Socoh, Ziph and *Mmst*. The first three are the names of well-known Judean cities. But the name *Mmst* has remained a mystery, ever since the first example was discovered more than 150 years ago. A typical assumption has been that it too must refer to a city, as-yet otherwise unknown biblically or archaeologically.

Wonder no longer. In a paper published in June 2024 in the *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology*, epigrapher Dr. Daniel Vainstub concluded that linguistically, based on the rules of Semitic languages, *Mmst* cannot be a proper noun referring to an Iron Age Judean city. Instead, it is a phrase reading “from [the] *mas’et*”—referring to a separate Hezekiah-period taxation effort, such as that described in 2 Chronicles 31:4-20. While *Mmst* would represent a slight abbreviation of this phrase *mnms’t*, Vainstub demonstrates some examples of otherwise-overlooked jar handles inscribed in the longer form, thus confirming his interpretation as correct.

For more on this research, read our article “After 156 Years, Has the *Mmst* Mystery Finally Been Solved?” (ArmstrongInstitute.org/1101).





Gold star
from Shiloh

5. TABERNACLE GOLD AT SHILOH

It would not be a top 10 list if it did not include Israel's tabernacle site, Shiloh. And once again, Dr. Scott Stripling and his Associates of Biblical Research team have not failed to deliver—although reporting on this item (or these items) has for now been minimal. Within a *favissa* (sacrificial burial pile) located along the edge of the tel—in use during the period in which the biblical tabernacle stood—a number of small star-shaped token gold “offering” items were discovered, including one impressive piece with a face engraved on it. For now, news of this discovery has been largely limited to our interview with Dr. Stripling at Shiloh earlier this year, as well as discussion on the Associates for Biblical Research channel. Details and pictures of this gold-faced guy from Shiloh will be published in due course; the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology will keep you informed. (This is a discovery that may find its way to others’ top 10 lists for 2025—you got it here first!)

For now, check out our interview with Dr. Stripling at Shiloh on our *Let the Stones Speak* podcast ([ArmstrongInstitute.org/1080](https://armstronginstitute.org/1080)). You can also watch an in-house Associates of Biblical Research interview titled “New Discoveries in the Search for the Tabernacle: Digging for Truth, Episode 247.”

Mmst-stamped
lmlk handle

4. ANOTHER SEAL FROM JERUSALEM

In August, the IAA announced the discovery of another seal from First Temple Period Jerusalem. According to excavation directors Dr. Yuval Baruch and Navot Rom: “The seal, made of black stone, is one of the most beautiful ever discovered in excavations in ancient Jerusalem and is executed at the highest artistic level.” The seal dates toward the end of the First Temple Period and bears a winged figure framed by a paleo-Hebrew inscription reading, “Belonging to Yehoezer, son of Hoshayahu.”

Some have suggested that this seal may belong to a biblical figure. Jeremiah 43:2 mentions “Azariah the son of Hoshaiiah.” The names of the fathers are the same (הושעיה and הושעיהו—the name on the seal uses the longer theophoric ending, but this is typical and interchangeable). The initial names actually are similar in Hebrew, simply switching the first and last halves of the name (עזריהו and יהועזר), effectively rendering the same meaning.

Whether or not the individuals are one and the same, the numerical significance of this discovery remains. As accounted in a recently published corpus of First Temple Period inscriptions from Jerusalem (“A Corpus of Iron Age II Inscriptions From Jerusalem: The Background for the Writing of Biblical Texts,” coauthored by Armstrong Institute contributor Christopher Eames and Hebrew University’s Prof. Yosef Garfinkel), this seal brings the total for the city to 36; by contrast, the next highest number of seals comes from the city of Arad, with just five; followed by Lachish, with four. This alone demonstrates the administrative importance of Jerusalem as capital of the region.

For more on this discovery, read our article “Another First Temple Period Seal Found in Jerusalem—Could It Belong to a Biblical Figure?” ([ArmstrongInstitute.org/1107](https://armstronginstitute.org/1107)).



Black Stone Seal

EMIL ALADJEM/ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY

3.

COMPTON'S ASSYRIAN CAMPS

The Assyrian conquest of Judah is one of the most well-attested biblical events in Near Eastern antiquity. And the remains of the besieged Tel Lachish, Judah's "second city," stand out as some of the best attestation to the event. (Not Jerusalem, though. Archaeological excavations have revealed no evidence of destruction at the capital city, just as the Bible describes.) But where did the invading monarch set up his camps?

In June 2024, independent researcher Stephen Compton published an article in *Near Eastern Archaeology* purporting to show exactly where Sennacherib's siege camp at Lachish was located. Taking



the famous relief depiction of Lachish at Sennacherib's Nineveh palace literally, Compton overlaid the imagery onto an early aerial photograph of the undeveloped landscape, showing Sennacherib's military camp to be located with the strikingly similar outline of a site on the distant hill of Khirbet al-Mudawarra. Though investigation of the site has been minimal—with some evidence linking it to the time of Sennacherib—if confirmed, this would be the first time an Assyrian

camp has been identified in Israel.

But Compton does not settle for one Assyrian camp. He goes on to identify a "trail of Sennacherib's siege camps" throughout the land, many of them at sites also named *Mudawarra* in the Arabic language (a reference to a "camp of the invading king"). Compton identifies these historic names as potentially preserving the memory of the original Assyrian path of conquest. Most notably, he proposes a site in Jerusalem itself as the base of Assyrian operations

2.

CARBON DATING DAVID'S CITY

Debate has raged for the last two decades as to whether or not certain monumental structures discovered in Jerusalem date to the 10th century B.C.E.—the time of David and Solomon—or to the ninth century, long after the legendary rule of these biblical kings. Those in the latter camp often argue that 10th-century Jerusalem was a poor, unpopulated backwater—certainly nothing like the glorious capital described in the Bible.

Specific debate about certain structures aside: In April 2024, a new, landmark carbon-dating study of Jerusalem was published in the journal *PNAS*. Titled "Radiocarbon Chronology of Iron Age Jerusalem Reveals Calibration Offsets and Architectural Developments," it demonstrated, from a new and entirely novel perspective, that the Jerusalem of the time of David and Solomon was indeed a city. In *Haaretz's* rather glorious summary (a paper known for a minimalist bent toward David and Solomon), this "[f]irst broad radiocarbon study of Jerusalem casts doubt on the paradigm that King David's capital was a just small village It already extended over a vast area more than 3,000 years ago" ("Where Jacob Wrestled, When Shishak Destroyed: Top Biblical Archaeology Stories in 2024").

That said, the study was not solely concerned with the 10th century B.C.E. More broadly, it derived over 100 carbon samples from Iron Age layers spanning 1200 to 586 B.C.E. at several different locations within Jerusalem's City of David. Of the randomized samples—mostly seeds—almost 20 percent of them dated to the early part of the Iron Age (12th to 10th century B.C.E.), "clearly indicat[ing] widespread occupation of yet undetermined character, often underestimated due to the limited architectural contexts attributed to this period" (op cit). Although the study did not seek to date individual structures of particular centuries, the quantitative analysis does reveal that the city was densely inhabited at that time.

Another key takeaway from the study is a new proposition for the dating of Jerusalem's westward expansion, often attributed to Hezekiah during the late eighth century B.C.E. The study concludes that this expansion must have taken place earlier than initially thought—perhaps as early as the first half of the ninth century B.C.E.

For more on the research, read our article "A Revolutionary Carbon-Dating Study of Ancient Jerusalem" ([ArmstrongInstitute.org/1065](https://www.armstronginstitute.org/1065)).



Bat skull from Jerusalem's Givati excavations

YANIV BERMAN, CITY OF DAVID FOUNDATION



AUSTIN HENRY LAVARD

in preparing for a siege of Jerusalem that never materialized.

While the Lachish identification is the most likely, Compton has had his detractors. But stay tuned because there is something along these lines coming down the pipeline that is quite remarkable. For more on the current research, check out “The Assyrian Military Camp at Lachish—and Maybe at Jerusalem Too: An Interview With Stephen C. Compton” (ArmstrongInstitute.org/1065).

1. PHOENICIAN PRESENCE IN SOLOMONIC JERUSALEM

Go ahead and accuse us of bias in putting one of our own discoveries in first place, but it has made it into the top three of other lists, and not without merit! Not only is this 10th-century B.C.E. item the earliest gold piece ever found in Jerusalem, it's the best evidence yet of a direct Phoenician presence in Solomonic-period Jerusalem, something attested to in several scriptures, including descriptions of servants, craftsmen, royal wives and even goldsmiths.

Known as the Ophel Electrum Basket Pendant, this tiny piece of jewelry—a portion of an earring pendant—was first discovered during our 2012 excavation on Jerusalem's Ophel with the late, great Dr. Eilat Mazar in the area of supervisor and Armstrong Institute contributor Brent Nagtegaal. The item was not, however, noticed in the field but was discovered during the sifting process, following which it was packaged up and stored for later study.

Over the years, the item sat in storage, overlooked by the study and publication of other major discoveries, such as the bullae of Hezekiah and Isaiah and monumental 10th-century architecture (not to mention the final years of ailing health for Dr. Mazar and the transition of study following her death). Finally, on a visit to Dr. Mazar's office, Brent noticed for the first time this artifact that had been uncovered via the later wet-sifting of material from his area—and the rest is history.

Nagtegaal teamed up with Dr. Amir Golani, an expert on Phoenician jewelry of this specific type, and together they published the discovery in the 2024 volume of the Hebrew-language *City of David Studies of Ancient Jerusalem*. In short: The earring pendant is of a type very specific to Phoenician sites, as found in the Levant and throughout the wider Mediterranean. The item is of a highly personal (and possibly even religious) nature, a veritable cultural marker of the wearer. As such, it is evidence of direct Phoenician presence in Jerusalem—and given the specific layer on the Ophel in which it was found, during the 10th century B.C.E. no less—the time of Solomon, during which he expanded the city north onto the Ophel and beyond. “And Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants unto Solomon” indeed (1 Kings 5:15).

For more on this discovery, check out Nagtegaal's article “The Golden Earring Pendant of Jerusalem” (ArmstrongInstitute.org/1124). And if you'd like to see this artifact in person, visit our exhibit “Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered” in Edmond, Oklahoma, where it is on display for the first time in 3,000 years—since the days of Solomon. Look closely though, or you'll miss it. The craftsmanship for such a minuscule item is extraordinary—small wonder Solomon sought the contribution of Phoenicia's goldsmiths (2 Chronicles 2:13).

We look forward to the discoveries that 2025 will bring! ■

Ophel Electrum
Basket Pendant

Uncovering the Biblical City of Sodom

Researchers have uncovered evidence of nuclear-level devastation at an ancient site in the Dead Sea region. But is it in the right place, at the right time? Is it biblical Sodom?

BY CHRISTOPHER EAMES



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A SENSATIONAL DISCOVERY MADE INTERNATIONAL headlines in 2021: At the biblical site of Sodom—Tall el-Hammam—jaw-dropping evidence had been uncovered of some sort of fiery holocaust event that wiped out the city instantaneously, killing all inhabitants within *half a second*.

According to chemical analyses of remains from the site, temperatures briefly spiked to levels approaching that of the surface of the *sun*.

What was the cause? Researchers explained that it was an “airburst event,” something like the mystery explosion in Tunguska, Russia, in 1908—when a meteor entering Earth’s atmosphere exploded above ground. There was no crater, but everything below was flattened and incinerated by a yield equivalent to *hundreds* of atomic bombs—something akin to “brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven,” to use biblical language (Genesis 19:24).

The discovery of some sort of fiery holocaust at Tall el-Hammam was not without its detractors, however. Ironically, some of the most heated criticism came from scholars in the religious community itself, who argued that Tall el-Hammam could *not* be Sodom. They gave two reasons: The event occurred at the *wrong time* and in the *wrong place*. Apparently, the destruction event occurred *hundreds* of years after the biblical event should have occurred and nowhere near the location in which it should have occurred.

If Tall el-Hammam’s chief excavator, Dr. Steven Collins, is right about his findings—if his site is indeed Sodom and if this event is none other than the one of infamy described in Genesis 19—then he is responsible for one of the most astounding and sensational discoveries in the history of biblical archaeology.

But could Tall el-Hammam, on the northern end of the Dead Sea, be Sodom?

Southern Sodom?

Chances are, if you pull out a Bible map, it will place Sodom and its related “cities of the Plain” in the southeastern part of the Dead Sea region. For close to a century, the location of the city in this southern regional location has been taken almost for granted—and not without cause.

Ezekiel 16:46, for example, poetically describes Jerusalem: “[T]hine elder sister is Samaria, that dwelleth at thy left hand, she and her daughters; and thy younger sister, that dwelleth at thy right hand, is Sodom and her daughters.” The words “left hand” and “right hand” can sometimes be used to refer to *north* and *south*, directionally—indeed, this is how various translations render this passage. Samaria, for its part, certainly is

north of Jerusalem; the inference, then, is that Sodom must be located somewhere south of Jerusalem. Further, the famous sixth-century C.E. Byzantine Madaba mosaic map appears to place “Zoora”—Zoar, the location to which Lot and his daughters fled—at the southern end of the Dead Sea.

It is also true that the inhospitable wastelands of the southern Dead Sea region are a picture of desolation. And embedded throughout the aggregate strata of the southwestern Dead Sea region are numerous miniature sulfur balls that can be pulled out of the sandy marl cliffs and even set on fire, calling to mind the picture of “fire and brimstone” that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

For these and other reasons, the ancient city of Bab edh-Dhra, an Early Bronze Age city on the southeastern shore of the Dead Sea, has popularly been identified as Sodom. And the site typically identified as Gomorrah is Numeira, situated roughly 20 kilometers further south.

Chief credit for the discovery of Bab edh-Dhra goes to the late “father of biblical archaeology,” William F. Albright (1891–1971). Albright believed Sodom, Gomorrah and the other “cities of the Plain” were all located in the southern Dead Sea region. Actually, he opined that Bab edh-Dhra was *not* the city of Sodom but merely a subsidiary. Not having satisfied himself with evidence of the cities during a 1924 expedition, Albright instead noted the steadily rising water level of the Dead Sea at the time, wondering if the cities of infamy were submerged further out, just below the shoreline. “There is, accordingly, little likelihood that the exact sites of the

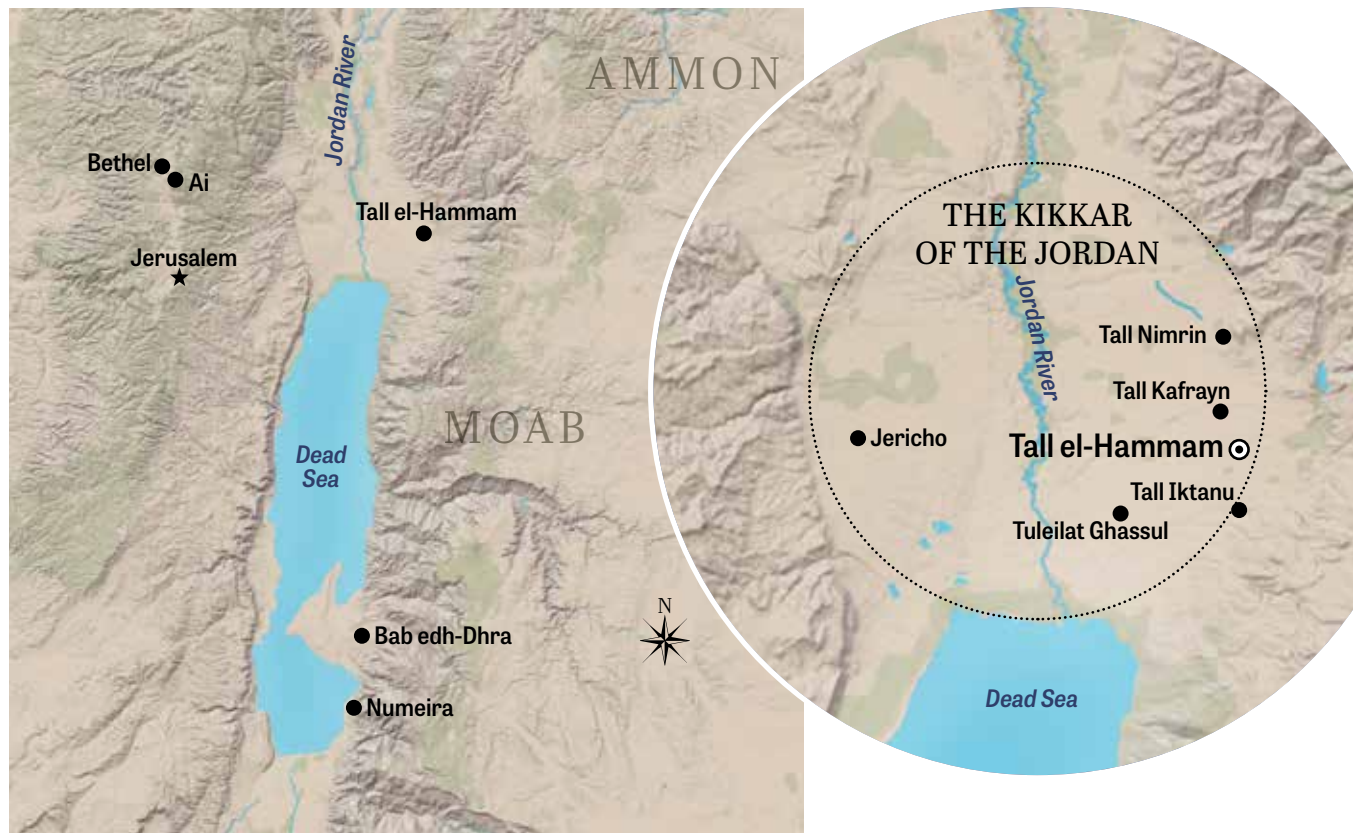
original Zoar, of Sodom, or of Gomorrah will ever be recovered,” he concluded (“The Archaeological Results of an Expedition to Moab and the Dead Sea,” 1924).

Nevertheless, following Albright’s general lead, his student Paul Lapp began excavating Bab edh-Dhra in 1965, followed by Lapp’s own student, Walter Rast, in the 1970s (at which time Numeira was discovered and also began to be excavated). Rast concluded that “these two Early Bronze III cities of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira may well be reflected in the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible” (“Bronze Age Cities Along the Dead Sea,” 1987).

Granted, Bab edh-Dhra is relatively small; investigation of both it and Numeira revealed Early Bronze destruction layers, predating Abraham; further, their destructions did not seem to have occurred at the same time (there is also speculation that these cities were abandoned, not destroyed).

As for deposits of sulfur/bitumen, these are located more generally in the southwestern region of the Dead Sea, rather than the southeast; further, they are stratified within multiple sedimentary layers. Moreover, the Bible actually indicates the presence of such deposits even prior to the destruction of Sodom. Genesis 14:10 states that the “vale of Siddim was full of *slime pits*,” a word alternatively translated as “bitumen” or “tar,” a key component of which is sulfur.

Still, these underground sulfur deposits in the region led southern proponents to tenuously hypothesize that the cause for the Genesis 19 destruction was some kind of earthquake along the Rift Valley fault line. This quake ignited an underground pocket of gases, which caused



some sort of explosion that ejected burning matter into the air, subsequently raining down on the cities in question.

Various other explanations exist. For those holding to Albright's initial hypothesis—that the cities were sunken at the southern end of the Dead Sea—this has been effectively disproved due to the alarming shrinkage of the Dead Sea since the 1960s, exposing much of this area without the slightest trace of civilization. Nonetheless, that Sodom was located to the far south was secure, and that Sodom was Bab edh-Dhra seemed more than likely—albeit on the basis that the Early Bronze dating for the site's destruction must have been wrong.

One proponent of Bab edh-Dhra as biblical Sodom was Dr. Steven Collins.

Starting South—Looking North

"I was leading a study tour—I had Sodom and Gomorrah on the itinerary," recalled Dr. Collins in a 2023 *Socrates in the City* interview with Eric Metaxas. "We were spending the night in Beersheba, in Israel, before we were going down to cross over to Eilat, to Aqaba. So I know the next day we're going to head over to the traditional sites [of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira]. And I thought, *OK, I'm just going to brush up on the story*. So I get the Bible out, and I read through the story. This was my very first moment—the *aha* moment, more or less.

"I read through ... Genesis 13 through 19—and I got to the end of it, and I thought, *I must be sleep-reading*. ... I woke myself up, sat up real tall, and read through it three more times. I read through that text four times, and when I got to the end of it, I closed the Bible and said to myself, *Not only is there NOTHING in this text that would locate Sodom toward the south of the Dead Sea, EVERYTHING clearly locates it north and east of the Dead Sea!* And I couldn't get past it."

Collins was busy at the time with the excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir. "But I thought, *Someday, if life settles down and gets boring, I'm going to come back to this point*. Because this is really bugging me. Why did I think it was toward the south? Why did *everybody* think it was toward the south?"

Collins's research led him to discover a paradigm shift in the early 20th century. The southern location, it turned out, was not the "traditional" site at all. In fact, 19th-century geographers consistently placed Sodom and Gomorrah *north and east* of the Dead Sea. And continuing on into the 20th century, in spite of Albright's influence, biblical geographers were still struggling with this notion of a southern Sodom.

"Back in the 19th century, virtually every single explorer scholar who went to that area ... Thomson, Condor, Wilson, and so many others—they put Sodom

at the *northeast* end of the Dead Sea," Collins said. There was one exception—Edward R. Robinson—who posited the southern location and whose work influenced Albright. According to Collins, "Albright had so much influence." Still, "it wasn't that everybody went that way.

"Let me give you an example. There's a famous five-volume Bible encyclopedia, published by Zondervan. If you look up the article on Sodom, the writer is making a beautiful case, going through Genesis 13, for a northern Sodom. ... And then he says, *but I'm not an archaeologist, and W. F. Albright is the greatest archaeologist, and he puts Sodom at the south end of the Dead Sea, so I suppose I have to defer to him*. And I'm going, *NO, you don't!* And if you go to Zoar—which is a related town—just over to the 'Z' section of that encyclopedia, that writer makes a beautiful case for a northern Sodom, and sticks to his guns" (ibid).

Why did these early explorers and geographers, with near unanimity, locate Sodom in the north?

The Inheritance of Lot

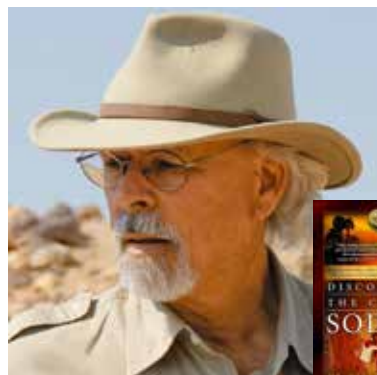
The key is Genesis 13. "Genesis 13 is the verbal map," observed Dr. Collins. "It is specifically written, consciously by the author to take the reader to the site of Sodom."

Genesis 13 records the account of Abram and his nephew Lot parting ways because "the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together" (verse 6). Note that this conversation takes place in the region of "Bethel and Ai" (verses 3-4) in the central hill country, some 20 kilometers north of Jerusalem.

"And Abram said unto Lot: 'Let there be no strife ... separate thyself, I pray thee, from me; if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or it thou take the right hand, then I will go to the left'" (verses 8-9).

"And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld *all the plain of the Jordan*, that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou goest unto Zoar. So Lot chose him *all the plain of the Jordan*; and Lot journeyed *east*; and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the Plain, and moved his tent as far as Sodom" (verses 10-12).

From this location in the central hill country, Lot observed before him this great, expansive plain *of the*



Dr. Steven Collins



JORDAN (referring exclusively to the Jordan River)—not of the Dead Sea (the southern plain of which would not have been visible from this point anyway). Choosing this plain of the *Jordan*, Lot subsequently traveled *due EAST* (not *south*), establishing himself on the far end of this plain—“as far as Sodom.”

There is further detail buried in the text. The word “plain” is the Hebrew *kikkar* (ככר), referring to a “disk” or something circular (and is a word used in modern Hebrew to refer to roundabouts). This southern end of the Jordan Valley, just north of the Dead Sea, just so happens to be a massive circular alluvial plain, one that would fit well with this use of the term *kikkar*.

Verse 10 likens this well-watered area to the “land of Egypt.” Here again, the imagery is a perfect match: The flowing (and overflowing) Jordan aptly parallels the key geographical feature of Egypt: the Nile River.

How did Albright reconcile his belief with the clear description in Genesis 13? *He didn’t*. “Albright never, ever, in any of his writings, does any textual analysis on Genesis 13:1-12. Never touches the geography,” marveled Collins.

Given the rather explicit description in Genesis 13, Collins argued that other less obvious, piecemeal biblical clues must be interpreted in *light* of it, rather than in *spite* of it. A case in point being Ezekiel 16:46: Rather than using a *possible* interpretation of “right” as “south,” thus upending the otherwise obvious Genesis 13 text, perhaps the word *does* simply refer to the “right hand” (as many translations render it), and technically could therefore include the “east.” (After all, in the words of

Abram: “[I]f thou wilt take the right hand’ And Lot journeyed *east*”—Genesis 13:9, 11.) To that end, Ezekiel uses other words throughout when referring explicitly to the south, directionally (נגב and דרום; e.g. Ezekiel 20:46-47; 21:4; 40:2-45; 41:11; 42:12-18; 46:9; 47:1, 19; 48:10-33). The term used in Ezekiel 16:46, ימין, properly refers to the right hand (e.g. Ezekiel 21:22 and 39:3).

Genesis 13, of course, is not the only biblical evidence for the location of Lot’s settlement (though it is the most explicit). Another example is the settlement of his descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites—these two territorial entities clearly radiating out from this northeastern region of the Dead Sea, as the prescribed “possession” of the “children of Lot” (Deuteronomy 2:9, 19; see map, page 12).

As with Lot, then, we find ourselves standing in the central hill country, looking out east and beholding a well-watered, Nile-esque plain. We have our area. Now we must find our city. And one particular Bronze Age behemoth on the furthest side of the *kikkar* stands out above them all.

Tall el-Hammam

In the early 2000s, when Collins began searching resources for sites on the eastern side of the plain, he immediately ran into a problem: Archaeologically, it was a virtually blank map. Very few sites dotting the area had ever been documented on maps, let alone probed or excavated.

Eventually, Collins and his team found documentation of 14 specific sites, a handful of them more prominent than others, and one giant: Tall el-Hammam.

DATING SODOM’S DESTRUCTION

THE DATE OF TALL EL-HAMMAM’S destruction has been a major point of contention. The site has been dated to the Middle Bronze II period, within the early-mid part of the second millennium B.C.E. Generally, the terminal layer is described as dating based on pottery to circa 1750–1650 B.C.E. More recently, carbon-dating indicates a “93.1 percent between 1773–1627 B.C.E.” (lecture, “Is This the True Location of Biblical Sodom?”, 2024). Generally speaking, then, Tall el-Hammam was destroyed within the 18th to 17th century B.C.E.

This general time frame, well within the first half of the second

millennium B.C.E., is the time frame broadly attributed to the patriarch Abraham in Jewish and Islamic communities, as well as in many Christian communities. A relatively popular position within some circles, however, says that Abraham was on the scene at the end of the *third* millennium B.C.E.—several centuries earlier.

Most of this tension arises from the debate about the length of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt. Exodus 12:40 reads: “Now the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was *four hundred and thirty years*.” A fairly common conservative view holds to an early Exodus occurring

circa 1446 B.C.E., derived 480 years prior to the building of Solomon’s temple in 967 B.C.E. (1 Kings 6:1); adding 430 years for the descent of Jacob’s family into Egypt takes us back to circa 1876 B.C.E., and counting backward another 290 years takes us back to a birth of Abraham, circa 2166 B.C.E. This puts the destruction of Tall el-Hammam *centuries* after his death.

There is an alternative, popular late-date Exodus view—the 13th-century view—which would down-date Abraham by between one and a half to two centuries. Yet even this would not be sufficient to put the events at Tall el-Hammam within Abraham’s lifetime.

It had been noted in a small 1991 book by Rami Khouri, *The Antiquities of the Jordan Rift Valley*, as the largest site in the entire Jordan Rift Valley. It turned out that the site had, in fact, been briefly probed in 1990; until a landmine blew the foot off one of the workers. This reinforced an already present sense of “bad juju of the site” among the locals, recalled Collins at a 2024 Cosmic Summit lecture: “You don’t go there.”

When Collins finally decided to investigate Tall el-Hammam, the enormity of the site astounded him. “I’ve seen every site in Israel. I know how big the sites are, and how they feel,” Collins said in his interview with Metaxas. “We pulled up to Tall el-Hammam. And looking at it, I almost didn’t realize what it was. It was so big, that it almost looked like part of the natural landscape.”

Not only is Tall el-Hammam the largest site in the Jordan Valley; the site turned out to be the *largest continuously occupied Bronze Age city in the entire southern Levant*. And for Collins, this was a perfect fit; he had already proposed, based on the biblical account alone, that Sodom must have been “the largest Bronze Age city north and east of the Dead Sea.”

Sodom, after all, is a key controlling site featured repeatedly in the patriarchal narratives. It is the first and key city in the sights of the Genesis 14 four-army Mesopotamian juggernaut. Sodom, along with neighboring Gomorrah, is the only regional city described as being plundered by these invading forces. Sodom is repeatedly referenced as a landmark location; it’s the only one of the “cities of the Plain” mentioned by itself in the biblical account; and the king of the city, Bera, is

the only one who “has a voice,” who is quoted. Perhaps most notably, Sodom is actually included in the Genesis 10 “table of nations,” together with the likes of some of the great cities of Mesopotamia.

In 2005, Collins and his New Mexico-based team—led by Trinity Southwest University, together with Veritas International University, under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan—began excavations. Today, after 16 seasons of excavations, we have a much clearer picture of this Bronze Age behemoth—and its sudden and shocking collapse.

Welcome to Sodom

Tall el-Hammam, including its adjacent suburbs outside the city walls, covered an enormous area of 300 acres. Within this area, the elliptical walled lower city (“lower,” albeit still raised about 30 meters above the plain) stretched out more than a kilometer long, encircling nearly 65 acres. A massive angular, ramparted upper city rises up from the landscape like the Khetanna (for *Star Wars* enthusiasts) by another 33 meters again. It contained a four-to-five-story royal palace complex, with a footprint “slightly larger than the White House,” said Collins in a 2023 interview with Sean McDowell.

“It wasn’t just one big site,” he went on. “It was one big site with a whole lot of towns and villages. So it’s really a major city-state. ... You could put about six or seven Bab edh-Dhras inside the city wall of Tall el-Hammam. In fact, Bab edh-Dhra wouldn’t even be large enough to qualify as one of the bigger satellites of Tall el-Hammam.”

For that matter, Collins himself holds to what could be called an early Exodus view (albeit slightly later, in the ballpark of 1400 B.C.E., following the lower Septuagint chronology for 1 Kings 6:1—see ArmstrongInstitute.org/1133).

The primary contention, then, has to do with the length of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt. Were the Israelites really in Egypt for 430 years, from the time of Jacob’s descent to the Exodus?

This is a significant topic of debate, explained in our article “When Was the Age of the Patriarchs?” (ArmstrongInstitute.org/845). In it, we make the case

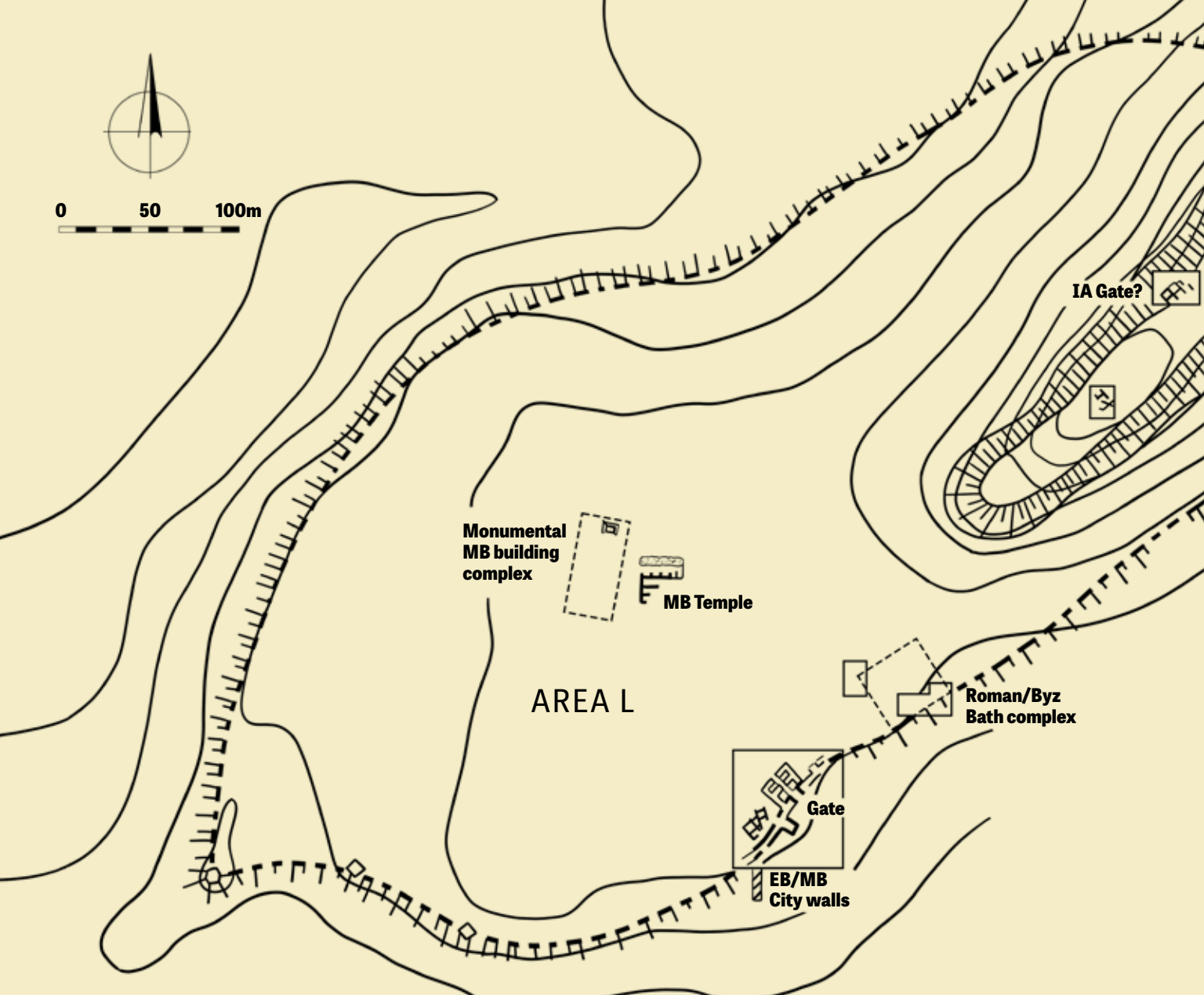
for a circa 215-year sojourn as the correct interpretation reflected by the biblical data. In short, ironically, this is reflected best in the New Testament itself. In Galatians 3:17-18, Paul notes the 430 years as spanning from God’s covenant with Abraham to the year of the Exodus and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

There are different opinions as to when this covenant is anchored in Abraham’s life. Nonetheless, even with an early (mid-late 15th century) Exodus date, this would put the covenant within the 19th century B.C.E. and Abraham’s death somewhere in the 18th century B.C.E.—near enough in the ballpark to the

earliest archaeological dating for the destruction of Tall el-Hammam.

Questions remain—but for an event nearly 4,000 years ago, the time frames are remarkably close (and certainly for that matter closer to Abraham than the dating for Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira).

And that this general period—the Middle Bronze II (19th–17th century B.C.E.)—is the correct one for Abraham is best reflected in the biblical cities mentioned in relation to him, such as Jerusalem, Hebron, Dan, Shechem and Damascus. These are cities that we now know archaeologically emerged during this period. ■

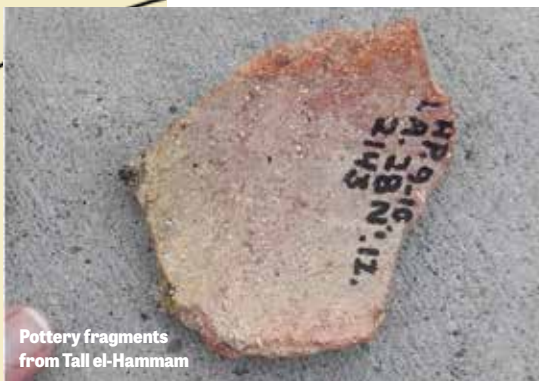
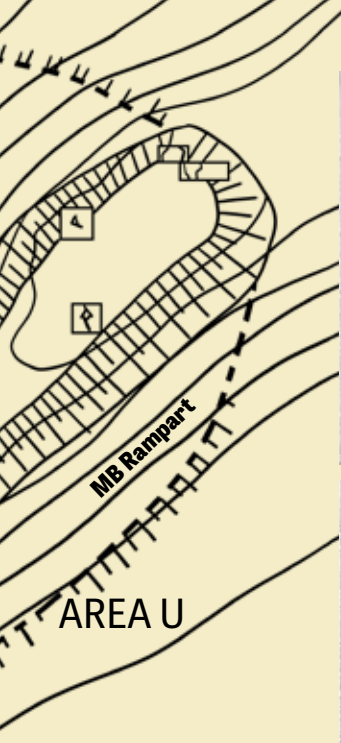


Tall el-Hammam’s city defenses were extraordinary. The city boasts the very first Middle Bronze ramparted fortification system in the entire Southern Levant. And its 35-degree rampart is the only such known fortification system made almost completely of sun-dried mudbricks, estimated to consist of at least 40 to 60 million of them. “That’s expensive, it’s time consuming, and nobody else did it,” said Collins in his Cosmic Summit lecture. “Every other Middle Bronze fortification system after this is built of rammed earth.” Additional defenses included towers spaced at 50-meter intervals around the 2.5-kilometer city wall, and the walls themselves up to 5 meters in thickness.

That the city was lavish is an understatement. It had, quite literally, hot and cold running water, derived from two springs—one warm and one cold—located inside the city. (The site’s Arabic name means “Mound

of the Hot Baths.”) Tall el-Hammam also boasted a large pillared city gate complex, constructed in the Minoan (Cretan) palatial style. This is Collins’s most prized architectural discovery: Archaeologists are always looking for the city gate complex, and Sodom’s is actually mentioned in the biblical account. Genesis 19:1 describes Lot sitting within the gate when he was met by the angels—and true to form, stone bench seating was found within the gatehouse.

Lot’s choice to move into the alluvial plain, and even establish himself with his own private house within the mighty city, would have seemed a no-brainer. “Now, he did respect Abraham—let’s not criticize Lot for being too greedy, and taking the best land—which, by the way, he did,” Collins told McDowell. “It is the best-watered agricultural land in the region. You don’t need rain. You have the Jordan River, plus you have a massive amount of



Pottery fragments from Tall el-Hammam

water disgoring from the Transjordan aquifer into that area. Springs run out all over the place there to this day.”

The fact that this city was so perfectly situated and equipped to thrive is precisely what makes it all the more unusual that partway through the Middle Bronze Age, the continuous occupation of the idyllic city suddenly and violently *stopped* and would not resume again for another *seven centuries*.

This occupational gap was noticed by Collins and his team almost immediately. Archaeological excavation showed that the site exhibited *no* layers or remains from the subsequent Late Bronze Age. The same was true of the immediately surrounding sites.

What happened to this area?

A clue came early on as the team cut a probe through first-millennium B.C.E. Iron Age remains, which immediately transitioned to an early second millennium B.C.E., 1.5-meter thick Middle Bronze ash- and bone-strewn destruction matrix. A volunteer plucked out of it a peculiar piece of pottery; it had a glassy surface and appeared to be glazed. Yet glazed pottery only emerges from the *Islamic* period onward—some 2,500 years *later*. What was it doing in a Middle Bronze level? Furthermore, the glassy surface had oozed beyond the break in the pottery, before solidifying—seemingly the product of some kind of brief, superhot flash-heating.

Collins tossed the piece up out of the probe to another member of the group—old-timer Gene Hall who, as chance would have it, had served as part of the World War II Manhattan Project—the 1945 Trinity

detonation in New Mexico of the world’s first atomic bomb. “This looks like trinitite,” Hall said, referring to the phenomenon of melted sand created by the atomic blast.

Collins brought the exemplar piece back with him to the New Mexico Technical University for analysis. Without explaining its provenance, he gave it to the lab analyst. “Nice piece of trinitite,” she said casually as she took it from him. “Where did you get it?”

Fire From Above

This “trinitite” was one of many signs of some kind of peculiar destruction event at Tall el-Hammam.

Destroyed pottery with surfaces melted into glass. Melted bricks, melted plaster. Massive quantities of ash. Scorched remains of people and vessels, not just strewn at random, but *directionally*—orientated in some sort of apparent “blast” direction. Mudbrick superstructures, up to 5 meters thick, sheared off at about waist height—the height of the rampart protecting them. The fragments of one particular vessel, which had a very unique design, were able to be traced—scattered along a 22-meter directional line spanning *six rooms*. And this destruction layer contained an unusually high salt content—“six times more concentrated than the Dead Sea.”

“There are skeletal remains that lie as they fell, wrenched and contorted. There’s human bone-scatter all through the final-day ash: human beings who blew apart before they fell,” write Collins and Dr. Latayne Scott in their 2012 publication *Discovering the City*

SEE SODOM PAGE 20

TALL EL-HAMMAM

Tall el-Hammam is one of the largest and most significant Bronze Age sites in the entire Southern Levant. It is situated at the far eastern side of an alluvial plain located at the southern end of the Jordan Valley. Though much of the site still remains buried, we now have a good impression of the general layout and key features thanks to the 16 seasons of excavations and probes carried out across the site by Dr. Steven Collins and his ТЕНЕР (Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project) team. Using the drawings of Tall el-Hammam site architect Dr. Leen Ritmeyer and artist Balage Balogh, AIBA artist Julia Goddard created the following illustration of the Middle Bronze Age site.



**MIDDLE BRONZE
MONUMENTAL
STRUCTURES**

LOWER CITY

Tall el-Hammam's lower city rises 30 meters above the plain and stretches out in a roughly elliptical shape a kilometer long and up to 500 meters wide, encompassing an area of nearly 65 acres. In the center of the lower city was a prominent temple with 3-meter-thick walls and an adjacent 60-by-20-meter administrative building. Dwellings populated the lower city. The biblical description of Lot's house as freestanding (Genesis 19:4) is an indication of special wealth and privilege; typical dwellings in ancient cities had shared walls accessed by a single street. Evidence of freestanding, street-surrounded housing has been discovered at Tall el-Hammam.

'WELL WATERED EVERY WHERE'

Besides the nearby Jordan River—in ancient times a gushing water source whose banks overflowed seasonally—Tall el-Hammam was surrounded by perennial springs, with water disgorging from the Transjordan aquifer and coursing down from the adjacent eastern mountains and wadis. Tall el-Hammam even had both hot and cold springs located within its walls (the Arabic name of the site meaning “Mound of the Hot Baths”). Collectively, this befits the description of the area as one that was “well watered every where ... like the garden of the Lord” (Genesis 13:10)—and makes it all the more inexplicable that the site suddenly ceased to function for 700 years following the Middle Bronze Age.

UPPER CITY

The elliptical upper city rises 33 meters above the lower tell and stretches out for some 400 meters. It contained a 52-meter-long, grand red-plastered palace which is believed to have originally stood 4-to-5 stories high, with a footprint comparable to that of the White House.



FORTIFICATIONS

Tall el-Hammam boasted some of the most extraordinary defenses in the world at that time. Immediately identifiable are the 35-degree ramparts of the upper and lower city; these are unique in that rather than being constructed of earth, they were made almost completely of sun-dried mudbrick—tens of millions of them. A 4-to-5-meter-thick, 2.5-kilometer-long wall wrapped around the lower city, with towers spaced at 50-meter intervals.

**MASSIVE
GATEHOUSE**

GATEHOUSE

Tall el-Hammam's Middle Bronze Age gatehouse complex is 21 meters wide, with a 2-meter-wide thoroughfare formed between two inner towers and framed by two additional, even larger outer towers. The gatehouse is of an unusually lavish, pillared Minoan (Cretan) palatial style. As Dr. Leen Ritmeyer observed the same year in which it was found (2012), “[T]he main and only gate of Tall el-Hammam has been found. If Tall el-Hammam is Sodom, then this is the place where ‘Lot sat in the gate’” (Genesis 19:1). Scoop—the gatehouse had stone bench seating.



To learn more about the Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project visit their website.

TALLELHAMMAM.COM

SODOM *of Sodom.* “[H]ere, at Sodom, the rocks cry out a catastrophe.”
FROM PAGE 17

What could have caused such a disaster?

The answer was ultimately published in 2021 in the prestigious scientific journal *Nature*: “A Tunguska-Sized Airburst Destroyed Tall el-Hammam, a Middle Bronze Age City in the Jordan Valley Near the Dead Sea” (Bunch et al). The paper was the product of 14 authors—airburst specialists (and as Dr. Collins often adds, most of them not persons of faith). The team presented the evidence that “a cosmic airburst destroyed Tall el-Hammam The proposed airburst was larger than the 1908 explosion over Tunguska, Russia, where a ~50-meter-wide bolide [meteor] detonated with ~1000x more energy than the Hiroshima atomic bomb.”

The article documented the telltale signs at the site of an airburst event, noting that the destruction stratum contained concentrations of shocked quartz, diamondoids, iron- and silicon-rich spherules, and trace remains of melted platinum, nickel, gold, silver, zircon, chromite, quartz and iridium (the latter of which has a melting point of 2,500 degrees Celsius, or 4,500 degrees Fahrenheit). Taken together, these constitute textbook signs of extraterrestrial interference—“commonly accepted cosmic impact indicators.”

Airburst events are a known phenomenon in Earth’s history, which is why such data can be comparatively measured. But no such post-Sodom event is known to have occurred within a populated area, exploding at such a low altitude to cause this kind of regional extinction-level devastation.

Elements aside, the more macabre remains are the human. One example is a pair of prone skeletal legs and feet—everything from the mid-thigh up having simply sheared away, vanished—the “hyper-flexed toes” of which are “consistent with either perimortem or postmortem exposure to high temperatures.” Another skeleton “was found buried in a crouching position with the hands raised to the face, a posture commonly adopted for protecting the head, as occurred during the volcanic eruption at Pompeii.”

“Based on the distribution of human bones on the upper and lower tall [mound], we propose that the force of a high-temperature, debris-laden, high-velocity blast wave from an airburst/impact 1) incinerated and flayed their exposed flesh, 2) decapitated and dismembered some individuals, 3) shattered many bones into mostly centimeter-sized fragments, 4) scattered their bones across several meters, 5) buried the bones in the destruction layer, and 6) charred or disintegrated any bones that were still exposed.”

IS SODOM MENTIONED ONLY IN THE BIBLE?

ONE ARGUMENT AGAINST THE historicity of Sodom and its destruction is that it is a city known only from the biblical text. “People have been asking me for 20 years, *If Sodom was such a big deal, and this event was such a big deal, how come we never hear of it from the other ancient records outside the Bible?* Never say never,” Dr. Steven Collins said in a 2024 Cosmic Summit lecture. He then boldly announced: “We have found Sodom in the Egyptian records”—the publication of which is forthcoming.

Collins credited the research that led to this discovery to “my good friend Anson Rainey,” one of Israel’s most highly regarded biblical geographers and linguists (who died in 2011). “I’m looking

at his excursus on the Egyptian execration texts—these are from the latter part of the Middle Bronze Age, and they are from the Theban pharaohs in the south, cursing all of these Canaanites,” Collins said. “[Rainey] put all of these cities mentioned in the execration texts on a map. I looked at the map. There’s a site called *Šutu*. That could be rendered a couple of ways from Egyptian. It could be rendered *Šutu*; it could also be rendered *Sudu*. And I looked at his map, and where does he put *Šutu*? Right on top of Tall el-Hammam.

“And then I realized that there is the objective case shift from Egyptian into any of the Semitic languages in which you add the letter *m*, becoming *Šutum* or *Sudum*, which

is exactly what we find in the Old Testament. So in the Middle Bronze Age Egyptian execration texts, the location of our site is called *Šutu* or *Sudum*.” But that’s not all.

In the ensuing centuries, the Egyptian name for the area changed. “After the Middle Bronze Age, the name of the site changed to *Abel*. This is on the Egyptian map list from the 18th and 19th Dynasties, well documented,” Collins continued. “The name of our site, of that area that we’re in, went from *Šutu* to *Abel*. What does the Egyptian word *abel* mean? It’s also recorded in the Hebrew. It means *to mourn a catastrophe*. From *Šutu* to *Abel*—what happened, to take us from one to the other? There *was* an event.” ■

Death would have been instantaneous, killing all living things in the area within a split second. Sudden destruction—and even this is reflected in the biblical account. Lamentations 4:6 states that Sodom was “overthrown *as in a moment*”—in the blink of an eye.

As for the continuing desolation of this and surrounding sites, the authors credit it to the hyper-salinity in the destruction layer created by the blast wave over the Dead Sea zone, essentially coating the cities and wider region in concentrated salt—making it impossible for crops to grow until rainwater had sufficiently washed enough of it out *centuries* later. During this period of desolation, certain evidence from the biblical and Egyptian texts shows that the “ensuing name of the area became Abel, the ‘mourning grounds’” (ibid; see sidebar, page 20).

Certainly, this is the sense given by Moses in describing the view from the mountains of this area, “which looks down on the *wasteland*” (Numbers 21:20; New King James Version).

Fallout

Collins, for his part, declined to coauthor the paper. He also recommended that the authors make no link with the biblical account. Yet such an obvious connection could not at least be mentioned; as such, the authors made passing allusion to the fact that the destruction event “*might* be the source of the written version of Sodom in Genesis.”

Chaos ensued.

Collins explained the drama in his interview with McDowell. “It’s the most accessed scientific paper in the history of scientific papers, that they know of ... this one just went crazy. And because of that, there was a lot of pushback. ... The anti-Bible folks went ballistic and really pushed back—made all kinds of accusations that photographs were faked, this was faked, that was faked. Why would these guys do that? Nobody bothered to answer that. Why would you fake any of this?”

“It went through a first peer review, of course, to get published initially. Then, because of some of the accusations that were made, it went through a second peer review, and remained published—it passed—and now it has gone through a *third* peer review on the basis of some additional stuff, and now the editors I think have basically thrown up their hands and said, ‘Enough is enough, the more you guys gripe, the more you guys try to overturn this paper, the more is demonstrated that



it’s actually factual.” Collins also noted that one of the chief antagonists was an airburst specialist whom he had turned to initially to do the research: The individual refused from the outset on the basis of any possible link of the event to the biblical account.

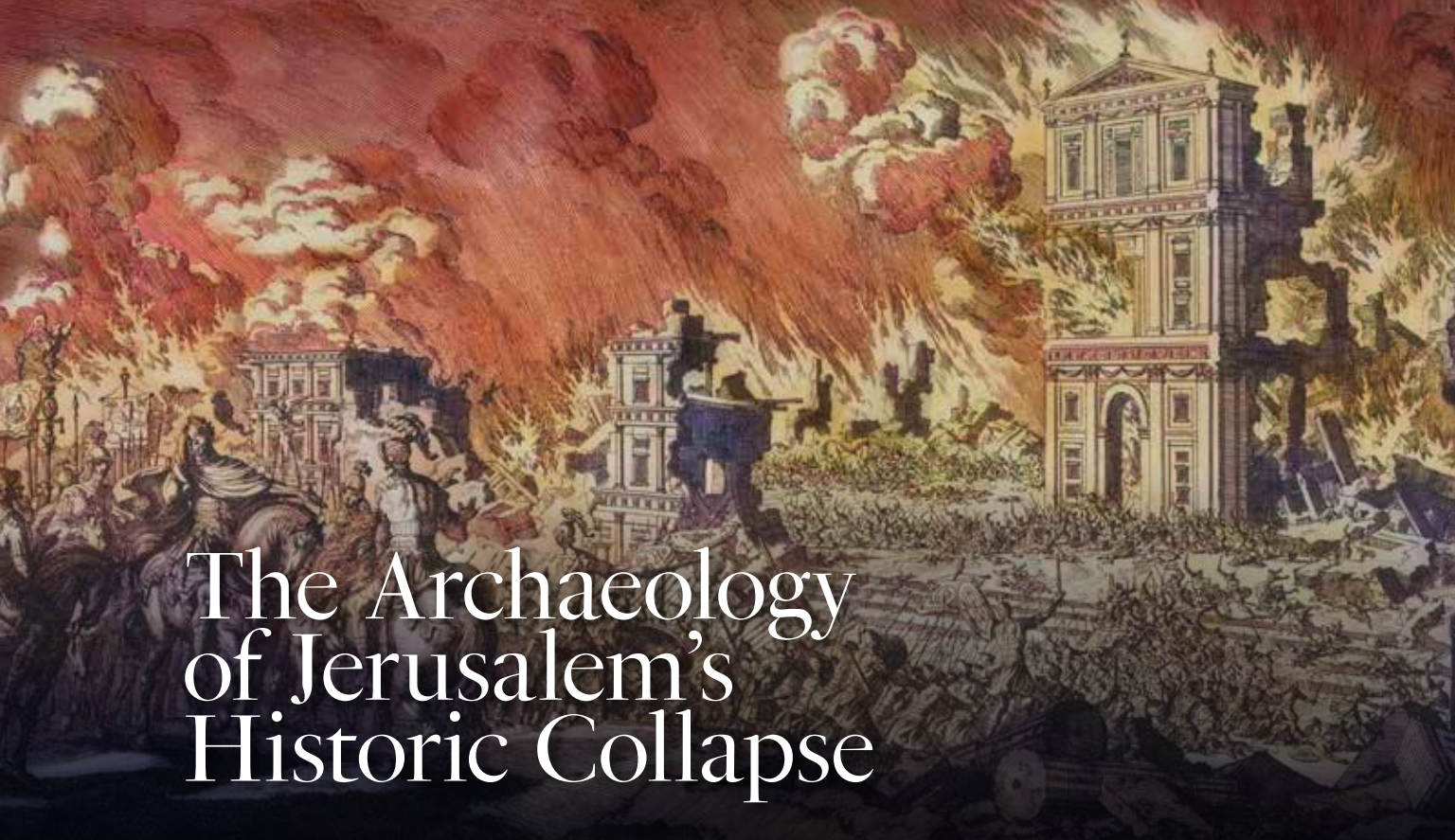
Accompanying the secular fallout was a degree of fallout from among the religious community. While the news was received with interest by the general public, there was significant pushback from within biblical scholarship, based partly on the location and partly on the date of the destruction (see sidebar, page 14).

At this point, however, Collins believes such misgivings about the identity of the site should be laid to rest. “This is Sodom,” he asserts. “If it isn’t, then by all means, biblically, tell us what it is.” “That’s a good question,” replied McDowell, who has also featured the southern theory on his channel.

“It’s nothing short of a cosmic event,” Collins says of the destruction wrought at his site. “Some [southern proponents] suggest that maybe some hydrocarbon gas belched out of the ground as a result of an earthquake, flew up in the air, caught on fire and landed on the cities. ... That would be a terrestrial event. That would be the ground belching fire, not the sky. The text clearly says, *fire and burning stone*—brimstone, if you like—from *YHWH OUT OF THE HEAVENS*. It’s coming out of the cosmos; it’s not a terrestrial event. And that’s exactly what we have.”

“I think it’s a done deal,” concluded Collins, regarding the identity of his site. “I don’t think it’s a theory anymore. I just think it’s a fact.”

As someone sympathetic toward the southern view, I have to agree: The infamous sin city and its destruction, by now, is as good as identified—no longer a theory, nor a merely mythical biblical tale, but *fact*. ■



The Archaeology of Jerusalem's Historic Collapse

The biblical text provides a detailed account of Judah's early sixth-century B.C.E. destruction. What does archaeology tell us?

BY NICHOLAS IRWIN

FIRES RAGED. WEAPONS LITTERED THE GROUND. People mourned. A once vibrant, peaceful city sat in utter ruin. The timeless lesson of cause and effect was on full display.

The reason for Jerusalem's destruction, as it is recorded in the biblical text, is simple: Obedience brought prosperity and peace; disobedience brought destruction and suffering. This was a cycle that played out time and again in biblical history. Just over 100 years before, during the reign of King Hezekiah, Jerusalem had been spared complete destruction at the hands of King Sennacherib and the Assyrian army.

But by the late seventh B.C.E., there was no escaping the coming tragedy. The destruction of Judah and its magnificent capital—including the first temple—was assured. In this article, we will consider the archaeology attesting to Jerusalem's dramatic fall to the Babylonians. First, let's look at what biblical history records about this seminal event.

The Biblical Background

Under the leadership of King Manasseh (697–642 B.C.E.), the people descended into paganism and idolatry. Such rank rebellion only a few years after

the nation was spared from being crushed by the Assyrian army meant unparalleled destruction was on the horizon.

The Bible documents God's stern warning: "Because Manasseh king of Judah hath done these abominations, and hath done wickedly ... and hath made Judah also to sin with his idols: therefore thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel: Behold, I bring such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle. ... [T]hey shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies; because they have done that which is evil in My sight, and have provoked Me, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day" (2 Kings 21:11-15).

Judah's fate was sealed: The nation would be destroyed and the people taken into captivity. Then came King Josiah. This king was the antithesis of Manasseh. When a copy of the law was discovered in the 18th year of Josiah's reign (around 623 B.C.E.), the king humbled himself and led Judah in national repentance. This act of humility moved God to make a merciful promise: Judah would not be destroyed until after Josiah's death. The punishment had been delayed, but the countdown had started.

The people relaxed. Josiah had been crowned when he was only 8 years old, and he was around 25 when this promise was made. Everyone expected Josiah to live a long life; thoughts of the nation's inevitable destruction were out of sight and out of mind.

Then the unexpected happened: Josiah was killed in a battle against Egypt at just 39 years old.

After Josiah's death, the Prophet Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations. The Talmud describes this book as a *kinot*, or a funeral dirge. It was representative of how the people lamented the death of Josiah, knowing what would befall the nation. "Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations when Judah had reached the point of no return," writes *Let the Stones Speak* editor in chief Gerald Flurry. The timer had gone off—the coming siege by a foreign power was certain and inescapable.

Although Judah did not completely collapse for nearly 23 years, they were difficult years of conquest and subjugation. It didn't help that Judah was led by lame duck kings who only exacerbated the nation's woes.

Josiah's son Jehoahaz reigned for three months before being taken captive by Egypt. Egypt considered Judah a tributary and set up Eliakim, Josiah's older son, as king. Pharaoh Necho changed his name to Jehoiakim. During the reign of this king, the prophecy in 2 Kings 21 began to take shape.

The biblical account of Judah's destruction is detailed and dramatic. But is it supported by science? In fact, a significant amount of archaeological evidence proves not only Judah's destruction in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E., but also what led up to that destruction.

THE FIRST SIEGE

Egypt and Assyria were the dominant regional powers in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E. This changed in 605 B.C.E., when Babylon defeated their combined armies at the Battle of Carchemish. This battle is remarkable because it is attested to in both the Bible (2 Chronicles 35:20; Jeremiah 46:2) and archaeology (e.g. Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle). In this epic battle, Babylon defeated the Egyptian-Assyrian alliance and became the dominant regional power.

The details of this battle, including the names of the specific kings involved, are recorded on the Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle. This small inscription, discovered in 1896, is one of the Babylonian Chronicles. It provides details for the first 11 years of Nebuchadnezzar II's reign.

The tablet records that although Nabopolassar was the king of Babylon at the time of Carchemish, he stayed back and sent his son Nebuchadnezzar to lead Babylon into battle. Following the victory, Nebuchadnezzar

received news of his father's death and quickly returned to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar II's ascension to the throne would have major consequences for Judah.

Judah was one of Egypt's many tributaries in the region. Logically, Nebuchadnezzar's first step after defeating the Egyptian army at Carchemish would be to make sure that each of these tributaries paid allegiance to Babylon.

The Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle records that in 604 B.C.E., Nebuchadnezzar "marched unopposed through the Hatti-land; in the month of Šabatu he took the heavy tribute of the Hatti-territory to Babylon." "Hatti-land" and "Hatti-territory" refer to the region that includes Judah. Both the geography and chronology match the Bible's description of Babylon's first siege of Judah.

The book of Daniel records that around 604 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar marched into Jerusalem and took treasures from the temple; he also took the sons of the nobles and royal princes captive (Daniel 1:1-3). This was Babylon's first siege of Judah.



Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle

At this time, Jehoiakim pledged his loyalty to Babylon. That commitment, however, was short-lived: "In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant three years; *then he turned and rebelled against him*" (2 Kings 24:1). After he stopped paying tribute to the empire, Jehoiakim was brought to Babylon and imprisoned (2 Chronicles 36:5-8). After 11 years, his reign over Judah ended.

THE SECOND SIEGE

Jeconiah (or Jehoiachin) began reigning in Judah after his father was taken to Babylon. He reigned only three months before he was deposed during Babylon's second siege.

The Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle records: "In the seventh year, the month of Kislimu, the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land, and besieged the city of Judah and on the second day of the month of

Addaru he seized the city and captured the king." This second siege took place around 597 B.C.E.

The text on the Babylonian chronicle aligns perfectly with the history recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:10. "[K]ing Nebuchadnezzar sent, and brought him [Jeconiah] to Babylon, with the goodly vessels of the house of the Lord ..." (King James Version). Jeconiah was imprisoned in Babylon. (For more information on

Jeconiah's time in Babylon, visit ArmstrongInstitute.org/117.)

But that is not all that Nebuchad-

Zedekiah's sons are killed before his eyes.



THE THIRD SIEGE

This was a troubling time for the nation. The prophesied destruction had come. City by city, Nebuchadnezzar's forces conquered Judah. In addition to Jerusalem, the biblical text specifies that Nebuchadnezzar conquered two other fortified cities: Lachish and Azekah (Jeremiah 34:7). The fall of these two cities is dramatically revealed in archaeology.

In "Archaeology and the Fall of Judah," Prof. William Dever wrote: "Level II [at Lachish] witnesses a final, heavy destruction, undoubtedly in 586 B.C.E. Especially significant are the several ostraca found in the guardroom of the city gate at Lachish."

We know these ostraca as the Lachish Letters. "These important documents, written in an iron-carbon ink with a reed or wood pen, during the lifetime of the Prophet Jeremiah, in the early part of the sixth century B.C.E., are the first personal documents in pre-exilic Hebrew script found in Palestine," Dr. Joseph Reider wrote in "The Lachish Letters."

These letters were sent from a small outpost to Lachish. They were intended to provide the governor of Lachish with military and political information (ibid).

Letter III is one of the most studied letters in the collection. It states: "The commander of the army, Coniah, son of Elnatan, has gone down to go to Egypt And as for the letter of Tobiah, the servant of the king, which came to Shallum, son of Yada from the prophet, saying 'Beware!'—your servant has sent it to my lord." This connects well with the account in Jeremiah 26:20-23, which describes Uriah the prophet giving a warning to Judah's king but then fleeing to Egypt for safety; only to ultimately be sought by the king's men and brought back to Judah. That event took place during the reign of Jehoiakim; however, these letters are recognized as being written during the reign of King Zedekiah.

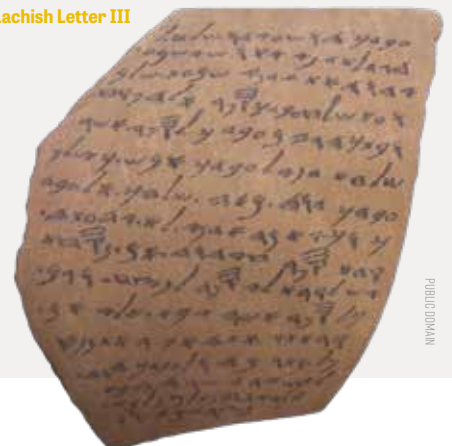
Another possible interpretation is that the commander of Judah's army was taking a contingent of men to Egypt to shore up an alliance,

which the Prophet Jeremiah had warned Zedekiah against. The Prophet Ezekiel describes this in Ezekiel 17: "But he rebelled against him in sending his ambassadors into Egypt, that they might give him horses and much people" (verse 15).

Regardless of the exact interpretation of the letter, this is obvious archaeological evidence of a connection between Judah, Egypt and a prophet warning "Beware!"—all in the final days of Judah.

Letter IV has a clearer interpretation: "Then it will be known that we are watching the (fire) signals of Lachish according to the sign which my lord gave us

Lachish Letter III



nezzar did during this second siege. Just as Pharaoh Necho did with Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar put a king in place whom he believed would show him unconditional loyalty. This too is described on the Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle: “He appointed there a king of his own choice, received its heavy tribute, and sent to Babylon.”

Judah’s new king was Zedekiah. This king is most

famous for his confrontations with the Prophet Jeremiah (see *ArmstrongInstitute.org/28*). But Zedekiah eventually stopped paying tribute to Babylon and formed an alliance with Egypt—two mistakes the Prophet Jeremiah had warned Zedekiah against. This enraged Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar, who set out to punish Zedekiah and destroy Judah once and for all.

Thus commenced the third and final siege of Judah.

The Capital Has Fallen

One month after Nebuchadnezzar took the fleeing Zedekiah captive and killed his sons, he sent the captain of his army to Jerusalem to finish the razing of the city. “Now in the fifth month, in the tenth day of the month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, who stood before the king of Babylon, into Jerusalem; and he burned the house of the Lord, and the king’s house; and all the houses of Jerusalem, even every great man’s house, burned he with fire. And all the army of the Chaldeans, that were with the captain of the guard, broke down all the walls of Jerusalem round about” (Jeremiah 52:12-14).

On the final day of his 1975 excavation in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem, Prof. Nahman Avigad discovered what was reported at the time to be the “first remains ever recovered of the two-year Babylonian siege which finally broke the defenses of the starving city” (“Found in Jerusalem: Remains of the Babylonian Siege,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March 1976). These remains, although monumental in importance, were some of the smallest artifacts you can find: arrowheads.

The four arrowheads were discovered under an ash layer at the base of a 2,600-year-old defense tower (ibid). One of these arrowheads was of the Irano-Scythian design.

In 2019, more of the same arrowheads were discovered during archaeological excavation of Mount Zion. Archaeologists discovered the arrowheads in the same context as a layer of ash, broken vessels, oil lamps and a piece of jewelry. Codirector and University of North Carolina-Charlotte professor Shimon Gibson



Lachish Letter IV

for we do not see Azekah.” Azekah and Lachish were both hilltop fortresses; in the event of an invasion or threat, officials in these cities would light fire signals to communicate with the surrounding region. Jeremiah 6:1 mentions such a signal going up at this time (New King James Version). The fact that no signal was coming from Azekah indicates that it had already fallen—and Lachish was next.

The archaeological evidence at Lachish shows that in 586 B.C.E. it endured a city-wide conflagration; the destruction wasn’t limited to the gatehouse or fortress walls or perimeter of the city. Hebrew University professor Yosef Garfinkel has conducted several excavations at Lachish and is an expert on the site. He has written that deep within the walls of Lachish Level II he and his team found “a massive layer of

fire destruction.”

The fact that this destruction layer continued into the domestic portions of the city, far from the gate, is evidence that the Babylonians destroyed the entire city by fire.”

In addition to the destruction layer left by the fire, Garfinkel’s team also discovered three Irano-Scythian arrowheads. This particular style of arrowhead was introduced into the region in the late seventh century B.C.E. and is known to have been used by the Babylonians on their campaigns.

Lachish was Judah’s second-most important city. It was a heavily fortified city and certainly a key focus of Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion. No city, however, was more important to Nebuchadnezzar’s plans of destroying Judah than the capital. His vengeful eyes were set on Jerusalem.



said, “It’s the kind of jumble that you would expect to find in a ruined household following a raid or battle.”

The archaeologists were most excited about the unique jewelry piece they had discovered. It appears to have been an earring with a bell-shaped, gold upper portion, with a silver cluster of grapes below.

Regarding the ash layer, Gibson explained: “For archaeologists, an ashen layer can mean a number of different things. It could be ashy deposits removed from ovens; or it could be localized burning of garbage. *However, in this case, the combination of an ashy layer full of artifacts, mixed with arrowheads, and a very*

special ornament indicates some kind of devastation and destruction. Nobody abandons golden jewelry, and nobody has arrowheads in their domestic refuse” (emphasis added throughout).

It appears the Mount Zion team is excavating within or around an Iron Age structure. While Gibson said, “I like to think that we are excavating inside one of the ‘great man’s houses’ mentioned in 2 Kings 25:9,” they have yet to excavate the building itself. Though the exact function of the Mount Zion structure is not yet known, we already have evidence of a monumental building that was destroyed during Babylon’s siege.

REVEALING JEREMIAH’S BAB

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH lived in Jerusalem in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E. and was in the city when it fell to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 B.C.E.

In his book, the prophet identifies several Judean princes and court officials, all of whom either lived in Jerusalem or visited Judah’s capital. Among the Judean princes and officials listed by Jeremiah are Jehucal son of Shelemiah (Jeremiah 37:3), Gedaliah son of Pashur (Jeremiah 38:1), and Gemariah son of Shaphan (Jeremiah 36:10). Each of these individuals has been corroborated by archaeology (we have written several articles on these important discoveries; to learn more visit ArmstrongInstitute.org).

However, in addition to mentioning the names of several Judean officials, Jeremiah also records the names of several *Babylonian* officials. “In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city. Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and sat in the middle gate: Nergal-sar-ezer of Samgar, Nebu-sar-sekim

the Rab-saris Then Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, carried into exile to Babylon the rest of the people who were left in the city ...” (Jeremiah 39:2-3, 9; English Standard Version). These three men were part of Jerusalem’s final moments—even sitting within one of its gates. They played an intimate role in the city’s dramatic collapse, but were they real?

The answer is, yes: Each of them has been revealed in Babylon’s archaeology. Names, titles and dates all match what is given in the Bible.

Regarding the first official mentioned in Jeremiah 39, Prof. Shalom E. Holtz wrote that his title *Samgar* “is likely the Akkadian word, *simmagir*, which, in the Neo-Babylonian period, was a title for a high official” (“The Babylonian Officials Who Oversaw the Siege of Jerusalem,” 2018). This high official is mentioned on the Nebuchadnezzar II Prism (EK 7834), which was discovered in archaeological excavations in Babylon in the early 1900s. This Babylonian court document written around 570 B.C.E. lists more than 50 Babylonian officials, including

“Nergal-sarru-usur, the *simmagir*.” This individual matches well with the Samgar of the Bible.

“This would be exactly equivalent to the information in Jeremiah 39:3, with the name Nergal-sar-ezer/Nergal-šarru-u ur, followed by the title *samgar/simmagir*,” wrote Professor Holtz.

The next official mentioned in Jeremiah 39 is Nebu-sar-sekim the Rab-saris.

In 1920, antiquities trader Ibrahim Élias Géjou sold a unique tablet to the British Museum. This tablet (Tablet BM114789) has 11 lines of Akkadian cuneiform text and records a business transaction with an important figure: “1.5 minas (0.75 kilograms) of gold, the property of *Nabu-sharrussu-ukin*, the chief eunuch, which he sent via Arad-Banitu the eunuch to [the temple] Esangila Month XI, day 18, year 10 [of] Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon” (translation from the British Museum).

The name *Nabu-sharrussu-ukin* is the Akkadian form of Jeremiah’s *Nebu-sar-sekim*. This match went unnoticed until the tablet was reviewed in 2007 by Prof. Michael Jursa, who was cataloging Babylonian officials from cuneiform

Building 100 Speaks

Nebuzaradan's final siege against Jerusalem focused on destroying the city walls, the temple, the king's palace and the houses of great men. In other words, the destruction of Jerusalem focused on wiping out the monumental structures.

One of these monumental structures has been discovered in Jerusalem's Givati Parking Lot excavation: This is Building 100.

Archaeologists Prof. Yuval Gadot and Dr. Yiftah Shalev lead the excavation and wrote about this structure in *Biblical Archaeology Review*: "The Iron Age

building [Building 100] recently excavated in the Givati Parking Lot section of the City of David was unique in Jerusalem's ancient landscape. A magnificent residence and reception hall used for official ceremonies and social gatherings ... reflecting the daily life of Jerusalem's ruling elite at the end of the First Temple Period" (Spring 2024).

Building 100 is a two-story structure made of both ashlar stones and fieldstones; it is composed of three rooms (rooms A, B, C). According to a 2023 *Journal of Archaeological Science* report, "All three rooms were found filled with a thick layer of destruction debris,

Y L O N I A N O F F I C I A L S

tablets. In a press release about the discovery, the British Museum said it was "a breakthrough for biblical archaeology—dramatic proof of the accuracy of the Old Testament" (*The Times of London*, July 11, 2007).

According to Semitic studies professor Lawrence Mykytiuk, this tablet dates to 595 B.C.E., a decade before the character is mentioned in the book of Jeremiah (around 587–586 B.C.E.).

Beyond the matching name and chronology, the title of this character has also been verified. Bryan Windle wrote, "His title, the Rab-saris, is identical to that in the biblical text (rab ša-rēši, chief eunuch in Akkadian)" ("Top Ten Discoveries Related to the Book of Jeremiah," 2024).

This is a remarkable synchronization of the biblical text and Babylonian history. "The extreme unlikelihood that two individuals having the same personal name would have been the sole holders of this office, and within a decade of each other, makes it safe to assume that the inscription and the book of Jeremiah refer to the same person in different years of his time in office," wrote Mykytiuk in "Eleven

Non-Royal Jeremianic Figures Strongly Identified in Authentic, Contemporaneous Inscriptions" (*Eretz Israel*, 2016).

The next Babylonian official mentioned in Jeremiah 39 to be confirmed through archaeology is "Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard." He led the final siege against Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:8) and organized the deportation of the remaining Jews to Babylon (Jeremiah 39:9). He is also the official who spoke to Jeremiah and allowed him to go free on the orders of King Nebuchadnezzar II. The biblical text shows that he was the trusted assistant of the Babylonian king.

Nebuzaradan is also named on the previously mentioned Nebuchadnezzar II Prism. On the prism, the name is recorded as "Nabû-zeru-idinna rab nuḫatimmi." *Nabû-zeru-idinna* is the Akkadian equivalent to the Hebrew Nebuzaradan. *Rab nu atimmi* is a term sometimes translated as "the chief cook" but can mean something nearer to "the chief cup-bearer." It's a name that implies he was deeply trusted by the king, as the Bible portrays.

Bible scholar Matthijs De Jong wrote that "the title of chief cook does not mean that this man cooked the king's meals. It rather denotes a high royal functionary, someone trusted by the king, who could, as we see from the biblical texts, be entrusted with an important responsibility." The name, chronology and function of these two mentions are all a strong match.

The discovery of archaeological evidence of three Babylonian officials from the book of Jeremiah is remarkable. It demonstrates that the book of Jeremiah accurately records history—down to the very names and titles of Judean and Babylonian officials involved in the destruction of Jerusalem.

After calling the *Nabusharrussu-ukin* tablet "a fantastic discovery" and "world-class find," Irving Finkel, an assyriologist and curator at the British Museum, asked: "If Nebo-Sarsekim existed, which other lesser figures in the Old Testament existed? A throw-away detail in the Old Testament turns out to be accurate and true. I think that it means that the whole of the narrative takes on a new kind of power." **BY SAMUEL MCKOV**



Jewelry found in the Mount Zion excavation

including large amounts of sediments, collapsed construction stones, artifacts and other architectural elements. ... The significant presence of charred remains found in all three rooms clearly indicates that the destruction of Building 100 involved a large fire” that “was intentionally ignited”

Within the largest of the rooms, Room A, archaeologists discovered charred wooden beams, indicating that the roof had caved in due to the fire. Room C contained more charred wood pieces and finely crafted ivory inlays, both of which most likely came from furniture (see Amos 6:4).

The excavation team was able to date the destruction using the pottery found in the remains. Among the pottery, most notable were the rosette impressions on the storage jar handles. These impressions replaced the *lmlk* seals that were used during King Hezekiah’s reign. According to Israel Antiquities Authority excavation directors Ortal Chalaf and Dr. Joe Uziel: “These seals are characteristic of the end of the First Temple Period and were used for the administrative system that developed towards the end of the Judean dynasty.”

When all the evidence is put together, it’s obvious that Building 100 is one example of Babylon’s siege against Jerusalem—and its great houses.

Structural Evidence

Other structures in Jerusalem have been excavated that also point to a complete destruction at the hands of Babylon.

Within Stratum x of the City of David’s Area G (near the Stepped Stone Structure), Prof. Yigal Shiloh discovered three main structures: the House of Ahiel, the Burnt Room and the House of Bullae. According to Shiloh, the destruction of each of these “buildings was total. Prior to this there was a conflagration. The charred remains of wooden beams were found above the floors”

Within the Burnt Room and the House of Bullae, Shiloh discovered bronze and iron arrowheads, which

he said “are indicative of the ‘war atmosphere’ in Jerusalem on the eve of its destruction.”

In Area E1, Shiloh discovered the Lower Terrace House and the Ashlar House. Both of these structures had destruction levels and evidence of fire. “A similar fate befell the city-wall for its entire length,” wrote Shiloh.

In each of these areas, Shiloh wrote that “[t]he evidence in the Bible ... is complemented by the clear-cut archaeological evidence: the total destruction of the various structures and a conflagration which consumed the various wooden parts of the houses. ... The atmosphere of war and destruction is emphasized by the quantity of weapons found scattered within various buildings”

When the late Dr. Eilat Mazar excavated the City of David between 2007 and 2008, her team discovered over 100 arrowheads. (To learn more about this crucial excavation, see article, page 30.)

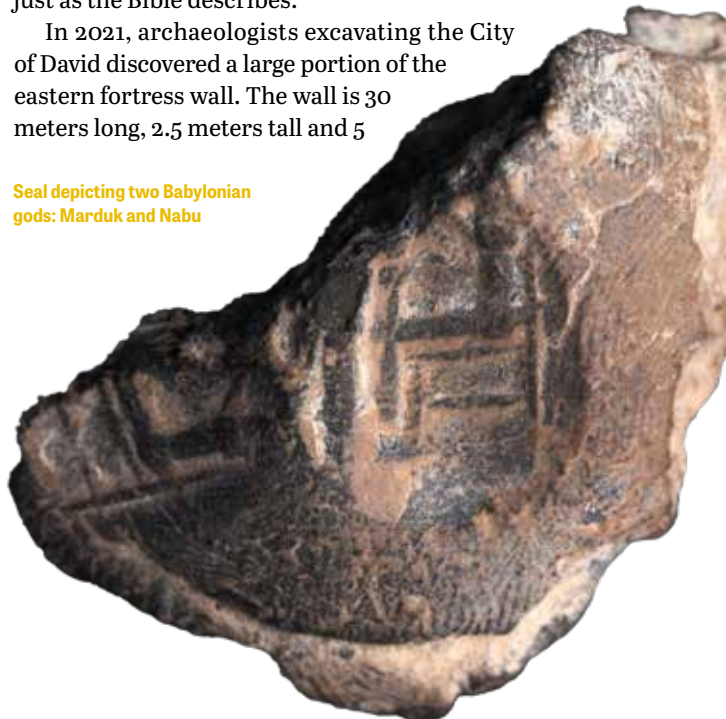
At the Ophel, situated adjacent north of the City of David, the story is the same: During her excavations in this area, Dr. Mazar reached First Temple Period floors. In Area D, or the Royal Structure, “the first burnt floor layer began to appear. We discovered that it was not only ashes that remained on the floor, but also large pieces of broken pottery, obviously part of very large vessels that had been destroyed and burned where they stood” (*Discovering the Solomonic Wall in Jerusalem*).

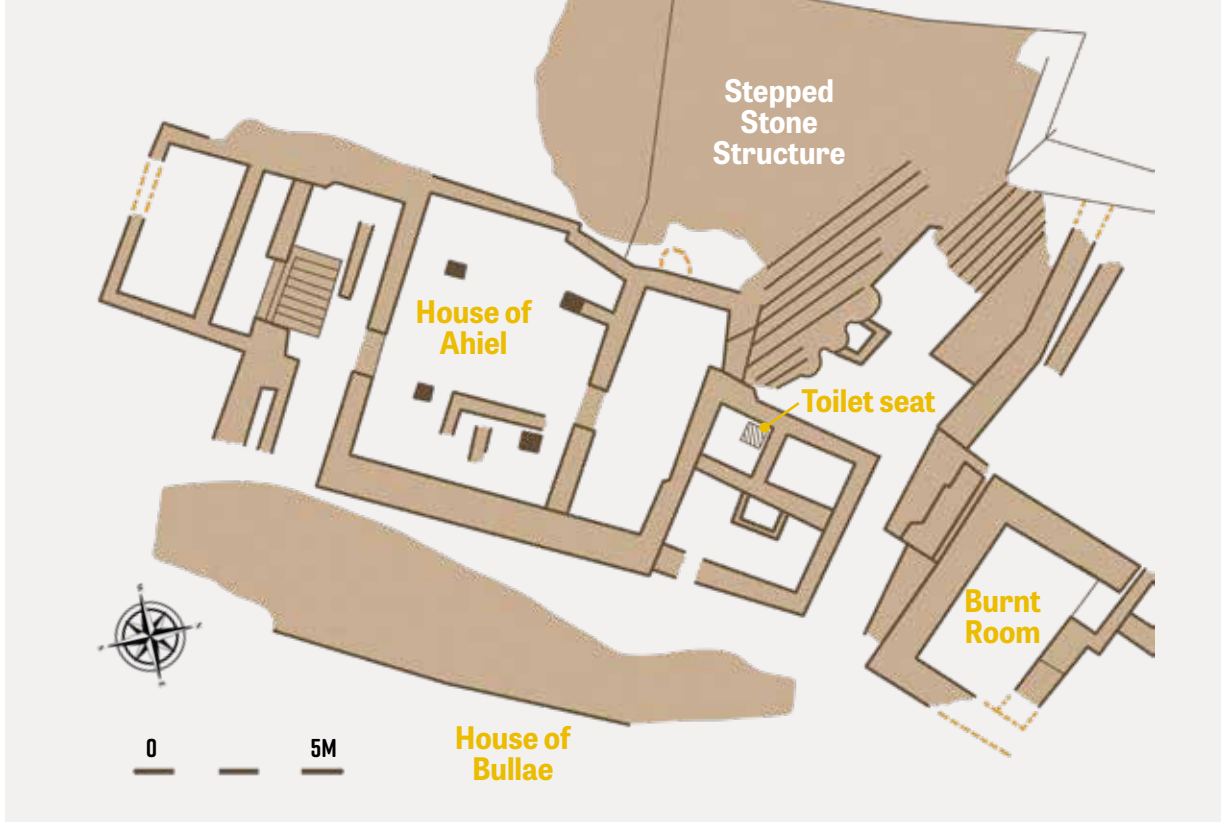
These large vessels, or pithoi, could have stored wine, oil or date honey. As researchers restored the pieces, it became increasingly obvious that the vessels “had suffered the effects of an intense and prolonged fire, whose signs were pronounced even on the stones of the walls”

The structures on the Ophel and in the City of David paint the same picture: In the early sixth century B.C.E., the buildings were destroyed in a major conflagration—just as the Bible describes.

In 2021, archaeologists excavating the City of David discovered a large portion of the eastern fortress wall. The wall is 30 meters long, 2.5 meters tall and 5

Seal depicting two Babylonian gods: Marduk and Nabu





meters wide and connects two previous sections of wall discovered by Dame Kathleen Kenyon and Professor Shiloh. While the wall itself did not show signs of destruction, a building attached to the wall had an ash layer and crushed pottery remains, including the telling rosette impression—evidence that it was clearly destroyed by a fire and collapsed in the sixth century B.C.E.

They also discovered a Babylonian seal against the wall. The seal bore depictions of Marduk and Nabu, two Babylonian gods. As the archaeologists explained, it's possible it belonged to one of the soldiers, though we can't know for sure. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were certainly steeped in pagan practices themselves—the very reason they went into captivity to begin with. But whether it belonged to a soldier or was a trinket of a Judahite, it represents a Babylonian presence in Jerusalem at this time.

The Vinedressers and Husbandmen

While it's important to study the cities that were destroyed during the Babylonian siege, we can also learn a lot from what wasn't destroyed. In studying destruction layers throughout Israel, William Dever came to the conclusion that "[t]he smaller towns, villages and rural areas were mostly not affected by the Babylonian takeover."

This too fits with the biblical description of Nebuchadnezzar's final siege against Judah. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote: "But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and husbandmen" (Jeremiah 52:16). This is exactly what we see from the archaeological evidence.

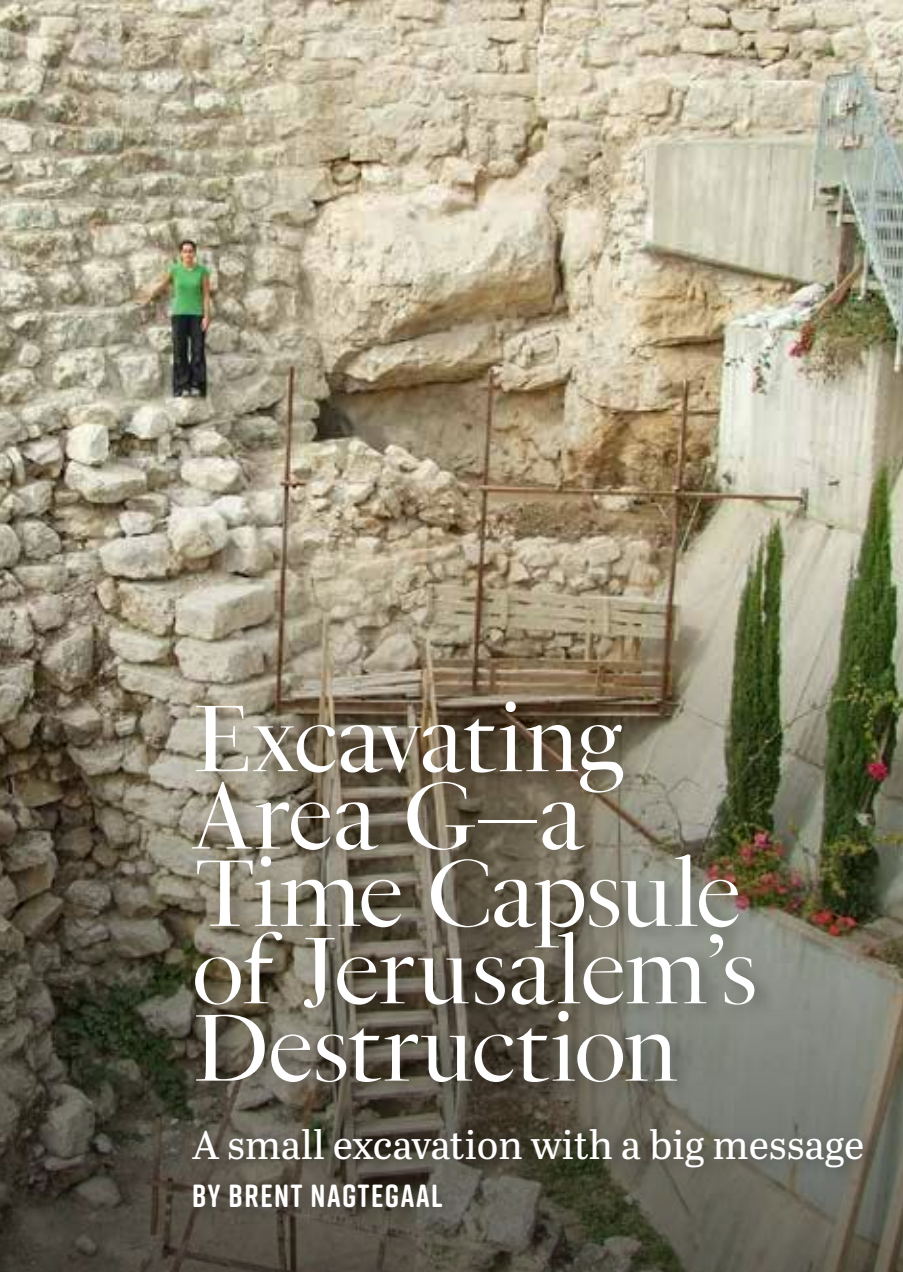
According to Dever, Babylon took a "calculated" approach and targeted "the major centers," leaving the countryside as a source of revenue for the empire.

One particular city Babylon left untouched was Mizpah. In fact, Nebuchadnezzar made Mizpah the new capital of the Judean province (2 Kings 25:23). He appointed a man named Gedaliah as governor over this province (Jeremiah 40:7-8). The archaeology of Tel en-Nasbeh, modern-day Mizpah, reveals that "[t]here is no destruction at the end of the Iron Age, and the site has major buildings of the sixth–fifth centuries B.C.E." (ibid).

It's remarkable to see the evidence of destruction within Judah—the burn layers, the arrowheads, the evidence of utter citywide conflagration. But it's also remarkable to see the areas that were left untouched. "Jerusalem and the temple were violently destroyed; the Judean kingdom did come to a disastrous end," wrote Dever. "Yet the remnant of the people left hope for an eventual reconstitution."

Studying the evidence of Babylon's siege against Judah puts cause and effect on full display. But it also gives cause for hope. God had promised the Jews through the Prophet Jeremiah that they would be permitted to return to Judah after 70 years of captivity. The vinedressers and husbandmen left behind were a reminder to the inhabitants of Judah that that promise would be fulfilled: They would return to their own land and rebuild the homes, the walls and the temple.

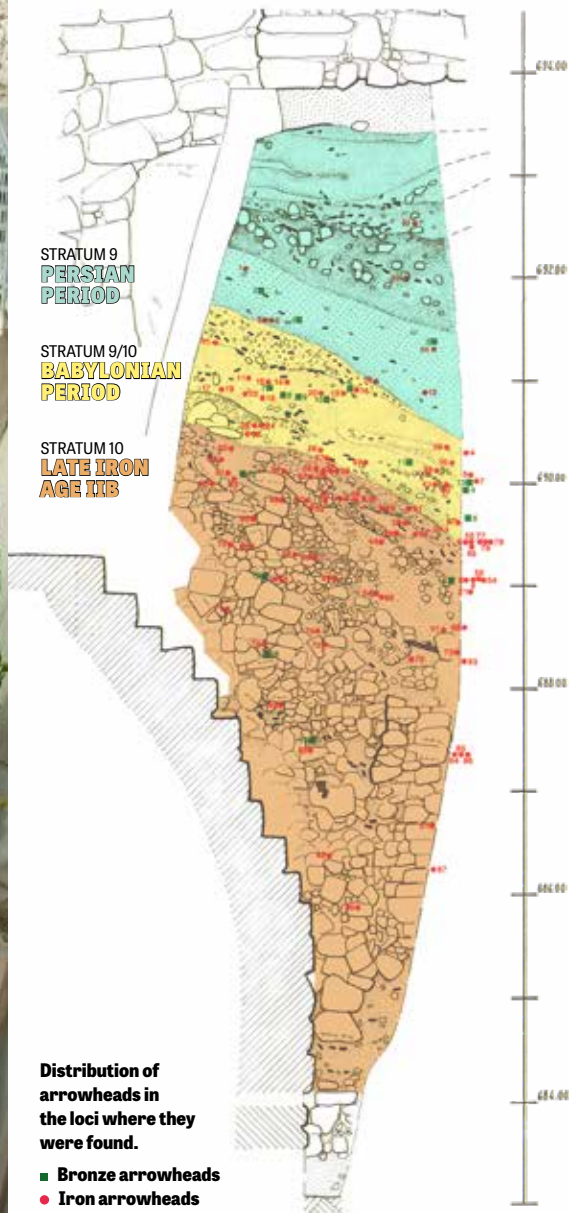
"And there is hope for thy future, saith the Lord: And thy children shall return to their own border" (Jeremiah 31:17). ■



Excavating Area G—a Time Capsule of Jerusalem’s Destruction

A small excavation with a big message

BY BRENT NAGTEGAAL



THE THIRD SEASON (2007–2008) OF THE LATE DR. Eilat Mazar’s excavation at the summit of the City of David yielded some tiny but incredibly important archaeological discoveries. They are among the most important discoveries of any excavation in Jerusalem.

The excavation was divided into two areas. The first area was on top of the ridge, situated on the Large Stone Structure (also known as “King David’s Palace”). The second area, which we called Area G, was a small patch of earth against the famed Stepped Stone Structure. (It just so happened Dr. Mazar’s Area G was adjacent to Prof. Yigal Shiloh’s Area G from the 1980s.)

When we first started work on Area G it was so small there was space for only two diggers. I was one of those diggers and was able to support Dr. Mazar in Area G from start to end. At first, I was the assistant supervisor to Dr. Yoav Farhi and, later, the overall

Area G supervisor. By the end of the excavation, we had dug through more than 9 meters of debris, and the area was large enough for five diggers.

Area G was tiny, especially compared to the excavation of the Large Stone Structure above. But it furnished some astonishing and important finds. These are presented in detail by Dr. Mazar in her final report: *The Summit of the City of David Excavations 2005–2008*.

The top layer in Area G dated to the mid-fifth century B.C.E., or the Persian Period (around the time of Nehemiah). The layer below this furnished archaeology that indicated it was a transitional period between the Babylonian and Persian periods.

Beneath this level was roughly 6 meters of material full of pottery, seals and other artifacts. And it all dated to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. It was incredible: We excavated about 45 cubic meters—or



FAR LEFT: Dr. Eilat Mazar and Dr. Yoav Farhi (along with the author) in 2007 examine pottery sherds dating to the time of Jeremiah.

ABOVE: Iron and bronze arrowheads from Area G before cleaning

LEFT: Figurine head from Area G

four full dump trucks—of debris from the time of Jeremiah and the Babylonian invasion.

Dr. Mazar recognized the significance of the fill we were about to remove from Area G and decided to do something novel (and expensive). She instructed that all of the material taken from Area G be wet-sifted. Practically, this meant that four dump trucks worth of fill had to be emptied on a wire mesh and washed by hand with water. Anything bigger than 4 millimeters by 4 millimeters that remained on the mesh was examined on the wet-sifting tray by a trained professional.

The number of items (as well as the variety) we found was extraordinary.

Area G furnished 107 seal impressions or fragments with discernible writing or imagery. Only one of these was found in the field—the rest were found in the wet-sifting process. Sixty-four of these had legible paleo-Hebrew script inscribed with the names of Jerusalemites at the time of Jerusalem’s fall. One seal impression carried the name of a Judean prince documented in the biblical text—Gedaliah son of Pashur (Jeremiah 38:1).

The debris also provided a glimpse into the religious worship in Jerusalem in the years leading to its fall. In total, 16 pieces of female clay pillar figurines were discovered, including several exquisitely carved female heads. Added to this were 25 pieces of zoomorphic figurines, 20 of which were horses. This was clear evidence that Jerusalem, as the Bible records, had a major problem with idolatry at the time of its fall.

Area G also provided abundant faunal remains from the time leading up to Jerusalem’s fall. The animal bone assemblage included remains of goats, sheep, camels, cattle, deer, gazelles, dogs, cats, geese, partridges, domestic fowls, and even two tortoises. Over 3,000 fish bones were also discovered. An analysis showed over half of these were from porgies. Other saltwater fish included mullet, drums, croakers and, to a lesser extent, groupers and sea

bass. The freshwater fish included North African catfish, Nile perch and, to a lesser extent, carp and cichlids.

Finally, there was sizable evidence of a military campaign. Most of this evidence came in the form of arrowheads. More than 100 individual arrowheads were discovered—the most from any excavation in Israel from the period of the Babylonian invasion. The majority of these arrowheads were made from iron (83 percent); the rest were bronze.

All the bronze arrowheads were of the trifold Irano-Scythian type introduced to the Near East by the Scythians in the late seventh century B.C.E., in vogue during the Babylonian and Persian periods. This type of arrowhead is considered more advanced than the typical tanged arrowheads of the time.

According to the final report coauthored by AIBA’s Victor Vejil and Dr. Mazar, “the presence of the bronze Irano-Scythian arrowheads, as well as the probability that they were the result of a major battle most likely involving a professional or an imperial army, are strong evidence that these arrowheads are associated with the 586 B.C.E. Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem.”

What does the archaeology of Area G tell us? Whether it’s the names of the individuals uncovered (the seals), their religious practices (the figurines), their diet and even the weapons of the invading army, the archaeology of Area G provides a snapshot of Jerusalem just before the Babylonian invasion. And that snapshot, remarkably, fits beautifully with the account documented in the biblical text.

Let’s also remember Eilat’s brilliant decision to wet-sift the entire area. It added to the overall cost of the excavation and created a lot more work for those of us on her team—but *was it ever worth it!*

To purchase the complete 500-page scientific final report of Eilat Mazar’s excavation of Area G, visit ArmstrongInstitute.org/publications. ■





The Tophet—Where Israelites Sacrificed Their Children?

What archaeology and classical history have to say about a detestable practice the Bible describes in the heart of Jerusalem

BY SAMUEL MCKOY

THE TRANSLATORS OF THE KING JAMES VERSION (KJV) of the Bible generally used apt and accurate words to translate the original Hebrew. But a few words stumped them. When they couldn't find the appropriate term, they would simply transliterate the word into English. One example is the word *tophet*.

The exact meaning of tophet has been heavily debated. The book of Jeremiah records a tophet in the heart of Jerusalem. Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezra describe the tophet as a place where Jews, in rebellion against the Torah, worshiped Molech and Baal, performed religious rituals, and even sacrificed their children.

But what exactly is the tophet? The archaeology of tophets powerfully illustrates the biblical account of the paganism that gripped Israel and Judah. It also reveals where the tophet originated.

Use in the Bible

The word “tophet” is used 10 times in the Hebrew Bible. In every scripture in which it is used, it is clearly being condemned. It is even used as a warning: “Thus will I do

unto this place, saith the Lord, and to the inhabitants thereof, *even making this city as Tophet*; And the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet, because of all the houses upon whose roofs they have burned incense unto all the host of heaven, and have poured out drink offerings unto other gods” (Jeremiah 19:12-13; KJV). For Jeremiah, the tophet was the epitome of horror and evil.

It was not an obscure place. In fact, it is alluded to around 25 times in the Bible. University of Pisa professor Paolo Xella wrote: “[I]f we collect all the relevant passages and analyze them thoroughly and synoptically, we will discover that no less than about 25 passages in the Old Testament testify more or less directly that Israelites and Canaanites (i.e. Phoenicians) sacrificed (and burned) their children ... in tophet near Jerusalem” (*Tophet: An Overall Interpretation*).

We know the tophet was located near Jerusalem, but can we be more specific about its location?

2 Kings 23:10 says the tophet was “in the valley of the children of Hinnom” (see also Jeremiah 7:31). The Valley

of Hinnom runs south and east of the oldest section of Jerusalem (for more information, see sidebar, page 34). The biblical text identifies Hinnom as a refuse site, or garbage dump. In the New Testament, Jesus called the Valley of Hinnom “Gehenna” 10 times, referring to it as a place of burning and destruction. Though Gehenna simply means “valley of (the son of) Hinnom,” it is translated in the KJV as *hell*. According to *Thayer’s Greek Dictionary*: “This was originally the Valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned; a fit symbol of the wicked and their future destruction.” This, then, was a perfect location for such heinous evils to be carried out.

The etymology of the Hebrew word *tophet* is less clear. There are a couple hypotheses, however. Rashi, a prominent rabbi from the 11th century C.E., wrote, “It is named תֹּפֶת [*tophet*] because priests would bang on drums תופים [*tophim*] so that the father should not hear the groans of the child when he was burned by the pagan image.” In 1887, William Robertson Smith proposed that it may come from a Hebrew or Aramaic word meaning *hearth* or *fireplace* (referenced in *La gorge géhennique*, by Prof. Robert Kerr).

The exact meaning is unclear, but the Bible is not: Horrible evils, often involving fire, occurred at the *tophet* (e.g. Jeremiah 7:31).

The Bible connects the *tophet* with the heinous act of child sacrifice. On 11 different occasions the Bible says Israelites made their children to “pass through the fire” (e.g. Ezekiel 20:31; Jeremiah 32:35—see KJV). The Prophet Jeremiah rebuked the inhabitants of Jerusalem because they “filled this place with the blood of innocents; and have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire for burnt-offerings unto Baal; which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into My mind” (Jeremiah 19:4-5).

The Bible does not provide much more information about what occurred at the *tophet*, but classical history does. Classical historians have even identified where this practice originated. Although the “*tophet*” still has not been discovered archaeologically in Jerusalem, classical history has assisted in the discovery of other locations, which can unlock our understanding of the one that once stood in Jerusalem.

Classical History of the Tophet

Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian in Sicily from the first century B.C.E., wrote about ritualistic child sacrifice to Kronos (the Greek counterpart to Baal) in Carthage, saying: “There was in the city a bronze image of Kronos, extending its hands, palms up and sloping toward the ground, so that each of the children when placed thereon rolled down and fell into a sort of gaping pit filled with fire” (*Bibliotheca*, book xx, chapter 14).

Cleitarchus, a mid-fourth-century B.C.E. Greek historian, wrote a remarkably similar account: “Out of reverence for Kronos, the Phoenicians, and especially the Carthaginians, whenever they seek to obtain some great favor, vow one of their children, burning it as a sacrifice to the deity, if they are especially eager to gain success. There stands in their midst a bronze statue of Kronos, its hands extended over a bronze brazier, the flames of which engulf the child.”

Tertullian, who lived in Carthage in the second century C.E., wrote, “In Africa infants used to be sacrificed to Saturn [the Roman equivalent of the Greek Kronos], and quite openly Saturn did not spare his own children ... their own parents offered them to him” (*Apology*, 9.2-3).

Plato wrote about the practice in his famous dialogue *Minos*: “With us [the Greeks], for instance, human sacrifice is not legal, but unholy, whereas the Carthaginians perform it as a thing they account holy and legal, and that too when some of them sacrifice even their own sons to Cronos [Kronos].”

The Bible and classical historians agree: The *tophet* was a place of slaughter of young children for religious rites. Professor Xella wrote, “[I]f analyzed comprehensively and without prejudice, both biblical and classical sources provide evidence for actual human sacrifices, where the victims are children killed and offered as a holocaust to the god Baal (Hammon), Greek Kronos, Latin Saturnus.”

Some scholars have dismissed the accounts of classical historians and the Bible, claiming these accounts are anti-Carthaginian and anti-Canaanite. Yet all the evidence points to the reality of child sacrifice. For such a wide variety of historians, in Judah and across the Mediterranean, to write so uniformly on the matter indicates this is more than anti-Carthaginian bias.

But we do not have to rely solely on classical or biblical history; we can also look to archaeology.

Archaeology of the Tophet

The Carthaginians were a Punic people, meaning they descended from the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were a Canaanite-ish people who lived in city-states on the coast in the north of Israel (in the area of modern-day Lebanon). The Bible records many interactions between Israel and the Phoenicians. Some of those interactions are positive, such as in the case of Hiram, king of Tyre, who assisted King David in the construction of his palace and King Solomon in the construction of the temple. But Israel’s interactions with the Phoenicians weren’t all positive.

Jezebel was a Phoenician princess who married Israel’s King Ahab. 1 Kings 21:25 says the wickedness of Ahab was “stirred up” by Jezebel. This Phoenician

princess introduced many pagan religious teachings and practices into the nation of Israel. Could this have included the heinous practices associated with tophets?

Oxford professor Josephine C. Quinn wrote that tophets were “found in central Mediterranean sites associated with the Phoenician diaspora, including Carthage and Hadrumetum in Africa as well as Sulcis, Nora, Harros and Monte Sirai on Sardinia, Mozia on Sicily, and Rabat on Malta. Urns containing the cremated remains of infants and animals are buried in these ‘tophets,’ and in most cases their surfaces are littered with stone markers” (“The Cultures of

the Tophet,” 2011). Every location we know of where Phoenicians migrated—North Africa, Sardinia, Sicily and Malta—we find tophets.

The largest and oldest tophet ever discovered was publicized in 1921, when a Frenchman interested in archaeology witnessed antique smugglers digging up stelae outside of the walls of ancient Carthage—which was built by the Phoenicians. These stelae came from a tophet dated to the late ninth and early eighth centuries B.C.E., which continued to be used until the Romans destroyed Carthage in 146 B.C.E. This tophet was established within two generations of the founding of

The Valley of Hinnom

ANCIENT JERUSALEM IS SITUATED on a hill between two valleys: Kidron and Hinnom. These two valleys are important to biblical history, much like the mountain itself (Mount Zion) on which the City of David, the Temple Mount and the Ophel are situated. The Valley of Hinnom, for its part, is filled with interesting history and symbolism.

Running southwest of the City of David, it intersects with the Kidron Valley on its eastern side. Hinnom, broader than the Kidron Valley, is called (biblically and in modern times) a *gai* (גַּי), which can be defined as “a broad, open valley, not necessarily traversed by a running stream” (Prof. Lewis Bayles Paton, *Jerusalem in Bible Times*). The term *Gehenna*, or *Gehinnom*, is a conjunction of the words *gai* (valley) and *Hinnom*.

The term *Gehenna* has been used as a metonym for hell. This is largely because of the detestable history of the site. The Valley of Hinnom is infamous for being the biblical location of child sacrifice. Jeremiah recorded that the Jews “built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and

their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart” (Jeremiah 7:31; King James Version). This horrific practice was condemned by the biblical authors.

American biblical scholars John McClintock and James Strong believe the Valley of Hinnom was ideally suited for the tophet, writing, “No spot could have been selected near the Holy City so well fitted for the perpetration of these horrid cruelties: the deep, retired glen, shut in by rugged cliffs, and the bleak mountain sides rising over all” (*McClintock and Strong Biblical Cyclopedia*).

King Josiah destroyed the tophet and desecrated the Valley of Hinnom (2 Kings 23:10-14; 2 Chronicles 34:4-5). From that point forward, Hinnom became a refuse dump. Scholars, such as Johannes Buxtorf, John Lightfoot and Ernest Wilhelm Hengstenberg, believe that a fire was almost always burning within the valley. In the New Testament, Jesus refers to it as a metaphor for continual fire. Medieval rabbi David Kimhi wrote that within *Gehenna* “fires perpetually burn in order to consume the filth and bones.”

Twentieth-century Scottish theologian William Barclay wrote that the site “was a foul, unclean place where loathsome worms bred on the refuse, and which smoked and smoldered at all times like some vast incinerator.” McClintock and Strong wrote that the valley “appears to have become the common cesspool of the city, into which its sewage was conducted, to be carried off by the waters of the Kidron, as well as a laystall, where all its solid filth was collected.” Being on the southwest side of Jerusalem, winds swept putrid odors away from the city’s inhabitants.

Before it became a hellscape, the Valley of Hinnom had served as a geographical border between two tribes of Israel. Joshua 15:8 and 18:16 describe the valley as the northern border of the tribe of Judah, putting the rest of Jerusalem in Benjamin’s territory.

The meaning of Hinnom is unclear. Many scriptures call this gorge “the valley of the son of Hinnom” or “Ben-Hinnom,” implying that Hinnom was the name of a patriarch and his son was a notable individual. He was most likely a Jebusite. Joshua’s account

Carthage, indicating that the Carthaginians had brought this practice with them from their homeland. This site was massive, growing over time to encompass over 6,000 square meters.

Professors Lawrence Stager and Samuel Wolff wrote, “We estimate that as many as 20,000 urns may have been deposited there between 400 and 200 B.C. Clearly the deposits were not a casual or sporadic occurrence” (“Child Sacrifice at Carthage,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January-February 1984). The urns contained bones of both male and female children of varying ages. Over 6,000 stelae were also uncovered, many of which

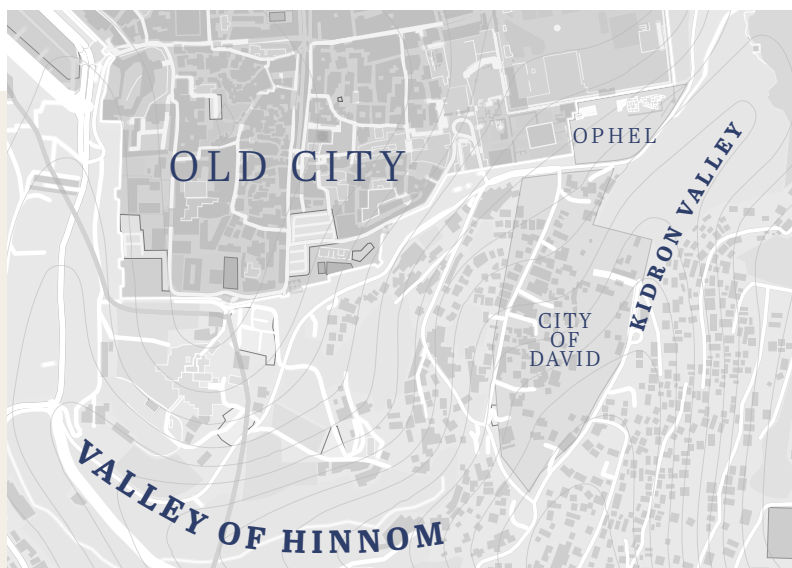
contained religious messages. Tophets from two other Phoenician sites—Mozia, Sicily, and Sulcis, Sardinia—date to the same period and exhibit similar finds.

Thousands of commemorative votives have been discovered at these sites. These votives are religious in nature. One such votive from Carthage reads, “To the lady Tanit face of Baal and to the lord to Baal Hammon” These are gods commonly discussed in conjunction with Phoenician and Canaanite culture. Baal is mentioned alongside the tophet in the Bible (Jeremiah 19). These votives “provide consistent proof that the archaeological areas called tophet were sanctuaries and that

shows that the valley was already named after the son of Hinnom when Israel entered Canaan and the Jebusites inhabited Jerusalem.

Right after condemning the horrific practices that occurred in the Valley of Hinnom, the Prophet Jeremiah wrote, “Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be called Tophet, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter: for they shall bury in Tophet, till there be no place” (Jeremiah 7:32; KJV). This final prophetic clause has been fulfilled. Today, the sides of the valley are dotted with graves. These tombs have provided some amazing archaeological discoveries, including the Ketef Hinnom Scrolls, which are among the most important finds in biblical archaeology. These two silver scrolls are the oldest Hebrew manuscript of biblical text, dating to the seventh century B.C.E. (see ArmstrongInstitute.org/1123.)

In 70 C.E., the Romans sacked Jerusalem. Josephus states that the bodies of the slain Jews were thrown into the Valley of Hinnom (*War of the Jews*, 6.8.5 and 5.12.7). The last struggle of the uprising also occurred in the valley itself.



These events further contributed to the dismal symbolism of Hinnom in Judaism and Christianity.

Shortly after the 70 C.E. holocaust, the location of Hinnom was lost. The valley was later named Wady er-Rabbabi. By the 19th century, when biblical enthusiasts and scholars set out to map the Holy Land, the exact identity of the Valley of Hinnom was unknown and debated for decades. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars confused the Valley of Hinnom with the Kidron Valley and the Tyropoeon Valley (which ran west of the original city). The location of Hinnom was not confirmed until archaeologists settled

the debate about the location of Mount Zion.

Today, Hinnom is becoming a center for tourism. The City of David Foundation has established a project called “Farm in the Valley,” which features a waterfall, flower garden and several other biblical crops. This site allows tourists to learn about the agricultural crafts and practices that ancient Israelites used thousands of years ago. The site is free to visit.

Carpeted in green grass, the Valley of Hinnom is now a beautiful place to visit. The City of David project is beautifying Hinnom in direct opposition to its long and disturbing history. ■

the rites performed in them were sacrifices,” wrote professors Jose Lopez and Mariagiulia Amadasi in “The Epigraphy of the Tophet.”

Tens of thousands of urns have also been discovered at these tophets. Some urns were filled with animal bones. Animal bones were only placed in urns when they had been offered as a sacrifice. When combined with the votives, it’s clear all of the urns in these tophets were filled with sacrificial bones. Offering a stillborn or dead child would not be considered a sacrifice; therefore, the children would have been alive when they were given as burnt offerings, as the classical historians recorded.

Stager and Wolff describe the Carthaginian tophet as being located in an open-air precinct enclosed by a thick wall evidenced by a foundation trench. Lopez and Amadasi wrote that tophets “are always—essentially—open-air sites constantly located on the margins of towns. ... The tophet is to be interpreted as a special sacred area, dedicated to the offering of newborn babies or infants of various ages (or of animals as substitutes) as a sacrifice to the deity.”

About 35 sanctuaries, or tophets, have been discovered in Africa, most of which date to the third century B.C.E. or later. The majority of these sites would have been inhabited by ethnic Carthaginians, or Phoenicians. Professor Quinn stated, “These later African sanctuaries operate in a very similar way to the tophet at Carthage.”

Quinn wrote that at all of these African or Punic tophets “[t]here were large-scale ‘public works’ that suggest that the sanctuary was administered, whether

by religious or civil authorities.” This is likely why the Bible highlights a few Israelite kings—notably Ahaz and Manasseh—as being patrons of the tophet in Jerusalem.

Biblical Link

Though no tophets have been uncovered in the Phoenician homeland, the archaeology of Punic colonies links the tophet back to it. Prof. Yigael Yadin wrote, “It is quite clear that the Punic (Carthaginian) culture preserved elements of the Phoenician culture, and the latter was definitely influenced by Canaanite elements.”

We don’t know exactly when Canaanite culture began the practice of child sacrifice. However, the Bible relates that it was already in existence by the time of Moses. This pagan practice is surely one reason for the command explicitly forbidding child sacrifice in the law of Moses. In Leviticus 20:2, Moses wrote: “Moreover, thou shalt say to the children of Israel: Whosoever he be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, that giveth of his seed unto Molech; he shall surely be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones.” This command is repeated in Leviticus 18:21.

Deuteronomy 18:10 provides a complimentary law: “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire” In Deuteronomy 12:30-31, Moses even identifies where the Israelites would get these heinous practices: “[T]ake heed to thyself that thou be not ensnared to follow them, after that they are destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying: ‘How used these nations to serve their gods? even so

2024 it with our Israeli friends—to take
FROM PAGE 3 King David *home* to Jerusalem!

Finally, I can also reveal that Herbert W. Armstrong College is currently working on bringing its amazing new Irish dance show, *Celtic Throne II—Psalter of Ireland*, to Israel. This show is not being sponsored by AIBA and is not part of AIBA’s archaeological activities in Israel. However, we are thrilled to see this new production being shared with the people of Israel. This epic new show, which explores the mysterious origins of ancient Ireland and even has a Jerusalem connection, is an upbeat, super-inspiring, incredibly exciting fusion of Irish dance, music, theater and cinema.

The past 15 months have been tough for Israel. The people of Israel, especially the children and elderly, and the brave soldiers, need encouragement and support. I believe *Celtic Throne* has the potential to really inspire and move every person who sees it, and even the nation. Apparently, *Celtic Throne* will be the first international show to tour Israel since Oct. 7, 2023.

The team is still finalizing tour details (and it’s always possible that it might not work out), but if everything continues to fall into place, *Celtic Throne* will visit Israel this June to perform six shows: three in Tel Aviv, one in Haifa, one in Beer Sheva and one in Jerusalem. If you

have friends or family in Israel, be sure to tell them. To learn more about this production, and to purchase tickets when they become available, visit CelticThrone.com.

As you can see, AIBA is thriving. It isn’t always easy or smooth going. We live in an uncertain world and in tumultuous times, and we do our work in a region that is especially fluid and unstable. There are always challenges, hurdles that need to be overcome. But we remain motivated and excited. We are inspired by the example of the courageous people of Israel. We are motivated by the crucial role the Jewish people and the State of Israel play in the world. And above all, we are motivated

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LET THE STONES SPEAK

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will I do likewise.' Thou shalt not do so unto the Lord thy God; for every abomination to the Lord, which He hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters do they burn in the fire to their gods." These scriptures indicate that the practices of the tophet and child sacrifice were already common among Canaanites during the second millennium B.C.E. Why else would Moses have so strongly and explicitly condemned them?

While archaeology has yet to reveal the tophet in the Valley of Hinnom, the excavation of Phoenician and Canaanite sites across the Mediterranean reveal evidence of ritualistic child sacrifice, the practice associated with the tophet in the Bible. Moreover, archaeology shows that this barbaric practice was often carried out at a "place of worship" on the outskirts of the city.

The word *tophet* in the Hebrew Bible has confused biblical scholars and been a subject of widespread debate. Need it be so complicated? We might not know the exact location of the tophet mentioned by Jeremiah in Jerusalem, and there might be some ambiguity around the meaning of the Hebrew word for tophet, but using the context of the biblical text, the archaeology of tophets across the region, and the references to tophets by classical historians, the meaning is clear: The tophet is a place of pagan worship of the most grisly and despicable manner.

Perhaps there is one bright side to this dark history: Even with the most detestable parts of Israel's history, archaeology and even classical history corroborate the Bible as an accurate historical source. ■

by the biblical history we excavate, analyze and publish, and the life-changing lessons it furnishes for all mankind.

We are very grateful to have the privilege to be a part of Israel's biblical archaeology. We have a long and special history with the nation of Israel, going back nearly 60 years to the work of our namesake, the late Herbert W. Armstrong, and his partnership with the late Prof. Benjamin Mazar, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and various governmental bodies. We've been a part of many successful projects over the years, but I believe 2025 is going to be our most important and exciting year yet. ■

MAGAZINE FEEDBACK

Beyond the fascinating features in your excellent publication, *Let the Stones Speak* has felt like a warm embrace over the past 15 months. Your articles affirm our deep connection to the Holy Land while lovingly reminding us that believers worldwide stand with us through our most challenging times.

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

I look forward every two months to receiving *Let The Stones Speak*. It complements my Bible study with fascinating information. It is so difficult to get archaeological news that is both not minimalistic regarding credibility of the biblical narrative and at the same time reliable. This issue I was moved to find that Shishak maneuvered near my house! I live between Rehov and Beit Shan; to see it on the map in your article and for the first time to realize that it happened in my area, was an emotional experience.

KIBBUTZ SDE ELIYAHU, ISRAEL

For me, receiving your *Let the Stones Speak* journal is often the highlight for the month. I read it from cover to cover.

BETH SHEMESH, ISRAEL

I work at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and your research published in the journal is of particular interest to me. I look forward to your publications. Your approach to work and dissemination is exceptional. I hope it will continue to be so in the future.

BULGARIA

I've received this magazine for several years now; and I have to say I'm very grateful for it as it is a wonderful and beautiful publication on many levels. Likewise, I follow your *Let the Stones Speak* podcast on YouTube.

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