Archaeology and the Bible

Recent discoveries shed additional light on the historical reliability of the biblical text

by Zeljko Gregor

The Black Obelisk (1845), the Moabite Stone (1868), and the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947) are big names in the history of biblical archaeology. But has that history come to an end? Not by any means.

In the past few decades, a number of seals, seal impressions, rings, bone boxes, and other ancient artifacts have surfaced—some of them in museums, some from private collectors, and others from recent excavations. These archaeological nuggets have shed more light on various individuals and events mentioned hitherto only in the biblical text. This article will review some of these recent findings.

The Ring of Hanan[1]

Owned by a Paris collector, this valuable ring has been known to the scholarly world since 1984. The seal's origin is unknown, but the shape of the letters indicate that it was used during the seventh century B.C. The seal is inscribed in three lines, each line separated by two parallel straight lines. The band is almost 1/10 of an inch in diameter, suggesting that it was designed for a man's finger. The inscription reads: "Belonging to Hanan, son of Hilqiyahu, the priest."

This Hilqiyahu is better known to us as Hilkiah, the high priest during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah in the last part of the seventh century B.C. The ending *yahu* is a theophoric (divine) element often found in ancient Hebrew names in Judah; the names in the Northern Kingdom carried *yah* as an ending. It seems that this Hilqiyahu was the same high priest who discovered the scroll of Torah in the temple that triggered religious reform in Judah (see 2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34).

1 Chronicles 6:13 and 9:11 indicate that Azariah, not Hanan, succeeded Hilkiah. The explanation could be that Azariah succeeded his father as high priest, while his younger brother Hanan functioned as a priest, just as the inscription on the seal suggests.

Azariah's name, however, appears on another bulla (seal impression) found in 1978 during Yigal Shiloh's excavation of old Jerusalem.[2] The inscription consists of two lines of writing separated by two parallel lines. It reads "Belonging to Azaryahu, son of Hilkiyahu." The impression does not mention the title of the owner.

Baruch's seal impression

In 1975, 250 bullae appeared in Jerusalem in the shop of an Arab antiquities dealer. Most of them were bought by several collectors, and almost 50 of them are now in the Israel Museum, while others are available to scholars for study. All these seal impressions are dated to the end of seventh or the beginning of the sixth century B.C., just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Among these impressions, three belong to individuals mentioned in Jeremiah (Baruch, the scribe; Yerahme'el, the son of the king; Elishama, servant of the king). All three individuals seem to be contemporary, living in Judah just before the exile. During that turbulent time Judah was ruled by king Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36).

The Bible tells us that God instructed Jeremiah to write a scroll prophesying against the king. Jeremiah's scribe Baruch wrote down everything that Jeremiah dictated to him. After reading the scroll in the temple, Baruch was instructed to read it again before high officials of the king's court. These officials (Elishama was one of them) were sympathetic to some degree to the message, but feared for Baruch. They advised him to go into hiding (Jeremiah 36:19). When the scroll was read before the king, he ordered its destruction and Yerahme'el, with other two officials, was ordered to arrest Baruch and the prophet Jeremiah.

The impression that bears Elishama's name is made of two lines of writing separated by two parallel straight lines. The first reads "Belonging to Elishama"; the second gives his title, "servant of the king." Yerahme'el's impression is made of two lines also, giving the name and the title of the owner: "Belonging to Yerahme'el, son of the king." Baruch's seal impression is made of three parts, divided by two parallel and straight lines, reading, "Belonging to Berekhyahu, son of Neriyahu, the scribe."

Another bulla with Baruch's name surfaced in 1995. It is the same as the one described above except for one significant difference: this had a fingerprint that may be Baruch's.[3]

A third seal impression that bears out the Baruch connection was found among the many discovered in the 1978 excavation of Jerusalem by Yigal Shiloh. This one, dated to the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth century B.C., reads "Belonging to Gemaryahy, son of Shaphan." The Bible says that when Baruch went to the temple to read the scroll, he read it in the chamber of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan (Jeremiah 36:10).

Seal of Abdi[4]

Purchased in 1993 by a London private collector, the seal of Abdi is among the very rare ones. Its inscription reads, "Belonging to Abdi servant of Hoshea." The seal is dated to the eighth century B.C. The name Abdi is the same as Obadiah. The Bible refers to three Obadiahs: the prime minister of Ahab (1 Kings 18:3); a prophet; and an official of Hoshea. It is unlikely that this seal would belong to either of the first two individuals, because the seal associates the name with Hoshea, the king under whom the owner of the seal served as an official. Hoshea was the last king in Israel (2 Kings 17:1-6). He reigned from 731-722 B.C., when the Assyrians destroyed his kingdom.

Tel Dan inscription

Beginning in 1966, Avraham Biran excavated the archaeological site of Tel Dan for many seasons and the most important discovery came in 1993, when his team cleared debris from the city gate area.[5] Part of the wall, destroyed by the Assyrian Tiglath-pileser III in 733/732 B.C., contained a fragment of an inscribed monument.

Unfortunately, the fragment has an incomplete message. It has 14 incomplete lines written in paleo-Hebrew, the script used before the exile (586 B.C.). The words are separated with dots and the inscription reads as follows:

(2) ...my father went up

(3) ...and my father died, he went to...

(4) real formerly in my father's land...

(5) I (fought against Israel?) and Hadad went in front of me...

(6) ...my king. And I slew of (them) X footmen, Y cha-

(7) riots and two thousand horsemen...

(8) the king of Israel. And slew (...the kin)

(9) g of the House of David. And I put...

(10) their land...

(11) other... (ru)

(12) led over is(rael...)

(13) siege upon...

The author of this inscription claims that Hadad went in front of him, supposedly in the battle. Hadad is the Aramean storm god, and it is probable that the owner of this stela is an Aramean. That he is not the king is obvious from line six where he refers to "my king." He is either a military commander or a vassal king, a devotee of Hadad, and subordinate to the king of Damascus. However, the most important lines are eight and nine, where Israel and "the House of David" are mentioned. This is the first reference to the phrase "House of David" outside the Bible.

Based on the shape of the letters, Biran suggested that the inscription comes from the first half of the ninth century B.C. In addition, pottery found beneath the fragment also indicates that it was placed not later than the middle of the ninth century, suggesting that the stela was erected few decades earlier.

Because the inscription is fragmented, we do not know the names of the king of Israel or Judah. This is further complicated by the fact that the name of the Aramean king did not survive either. Therefore it is difficult to reconstruct the exact history of events with certainty and find a solid biblical connection. However, it is possible that Dan suffered turbulent years between c. 885 B.C., when it was captured by Ben-hadad I (1 Kings 15:20) and c. 855 B.C., when Ahab received it back from Ben-hadad II (1 Kings 20:34).

Shortly after Ben-hadad captured Dan, it is possible that Israel regained control over Dan. During the early days of Ahab, Dan was occupied again by Arameans (probably by the owner of the stela), and later Ahab received it back from Ben-hadad II. At this time Ahab may have destroyed the monument and used some of the pieces as building material. This, however, is merely hypothetical reconstruction, and additional fragments of the same stela will be needed to construct a better picture of historical events related to ancient Dan.

Silver scroll

Between 1975 and 1980, Gabriel Barkay[6] discovered a number of tombs in Jerusalem. Most of them, however, had been robbed long ago except one, No. 25. The tomb was dated to the end of the seventh or the beginning of the sixth century B.C., just before the exile. The tomb contained skeletal remains of 95 people, 263 complete pottery vessels, 101 pieces of jewelry (95 silver, 6 gold), many carved objects of bone and ivory, and 41 bronze and iron arrowheads. In addition, there were two small silver scrolls, tightly rolled up. One of them was about one inch long and less than one-half inch thick, while the other was one-half inch long and one-fifth of an inch thick. It was assumed that these scrolls were used as amulets and that they contained some kind of inscription.

When the scrolls were unrolled and cleaned, the inscription contained portions of Numbers 6:24-26: "May Yahweh bless you, and keep you; may Yahweh let his face shine upon you,... and give you peace." This inscription is one of the earliest and best preserved that contains the name of Yahweh.

Herod's inscription

In 1996 Ehud Netzer discovered in Masada a piece of broken pottery with an inscription called an ostracon. This piece had Herod's name on it and was part of an amphora used for transportation (probably wine), dated to c. 19 B.C.

The inscription is in Latin and reads, "Herod the Great King of the Jews (or Judea)," the first such that mentions the full title of King Herod.

Seal impression, found in Tell el-Umeiri in 1984, mentions King Ba'alis. (Drawing by Peter Erhard.)

Boat of Galilee

Because of a severe drought during 1985 and 1986, the level of the Sea of Galilee was significantly lower than usual. Shelley Wachsmann, an expert in underwater antiquities, organized a salvage excavation[7] of what seemed like an outline of a boat. After several days of battle against the raising waters of the sea, the boat was fully excavated and successfully removed for conservation.

During the excavation, the archaeologists found several objects (pottery vessels, arrowheads, coins) in and around the boat. An examination of the artifacts suggests an approximate date for the boat; it might have been in use between the late first century B.C. and the second half of the first century A.D. In addition to artifact dating, the excavators sent samples of wood to a laboratory for Carbon 14 dating. These tests suggested a similar age.

According to the historian Josephus, this part of Palestine went through severe turbulence and destruction during the first Jewish revolt (67-70 A.D.). During the first year of the revolt, the Jews prepared a fleet made of fishing boats at Migdal. After Tiberias fell to Vespasian, the Romans built a fortified camp between Tiberias and Migdal. During the night, the Jews launched a surprise attack, then escaped to the Sea of Galilee. The next day the Roman fleet attacked the Jews on the sea, pushing them toward the shores, where they were slaughtered. Many Jewish boats were sunk. The number of the dead was estimated at 6,700.

The vessel was 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet high. Archaeologists suggest that it was made to carry up to 15 people. A boat like this could easily have accommodated Jesus and His disciples in their many voyages across the Sea of Galilee.

Caiaphas' name on a bone box

During November 1990, a burial cave was discovered in Peace Forest, south of Jerusalem. Excavators found[8] several ossuaries or bone boxes, some turned upside down (the sign that the cave was forcefully pentrated); however, some still in place where they were originally placed. The excavation yielded bones from six different individuals: two infants (2-5 years of age), a teenage boy (15 years), an adult woman, and an old man (about 60 years). During the time of Jesus, Jews had a custom of using these ossuaries as secondary burial containers for the remains of their dead. A body would be placed in a cave to decompose, and then bones would be put into a box called an ossuary.

Two of the ossuaries had lids. These lids were made of limestone and were of greater significance than the others since, they had the name of Caiaphas inscribed on the narrow side of each box. One of these boxes was beautifully carved, indicating that it belonged to someone important and wealthy. The inscription reads: "Joseph, son of Caiaphas." This does not necessarily indicate that Caiaphas was Joseph's immediate parent. Caiaphas may refer to a family name, that served as designation for the family of Joseph.

The bones of the elderly man were probably those of the man called Joseph. Unfortunately, the Bible does not indicate the real name of the high priest at the time of Jesus' trial. It gives us only the Greek version of Caiaphas. However, Josephus mentions the full name: Joseph Caiaphas, who served as high priest in Jerusalem from 18-36 A.D.

Andrews University involvement

Andrews University has been doing excavations in Palestine since the late 1960s when Tell Hesban was excavated under the directorship of the late Siegfried Horn. After the excavation was completed in the late 1970s, the Andrews University team started another operation under the MPP (Madaba Plains Project) name. The major target was Tell el-Umeiri, a site located south of Amman, capital of Jordan. During the first season of excavations in 1984 they found an interesting seal impression. It simply reads "Belonging to Milkom'or the servant of Ba'alyaša." In the Hebrew Bible the same name is spelled slightly differently (Ba'alis). It is mentioned only once and represents the name of an Ammonite king (Jeremiah 40:14). Before this discovery, Ba'alyaša (Baalis) was known only through the biblical text.

Tell el-Umeiri was one of the Reubenite towns. After several seasons, the excavators uncovered a fortification system made of double walls, rampart, and a dry moat at the base of the site. This fortification from the Early Iron I period (c. 1200 B.C.) is the best preserved in all of Palestine.

In addition to Tell el-Umeiri, the MPP team started excavating another important site, Tell Jalul, in 1992. This is one of the largest sites in Transjordan. After several seasons of excavations, the team unearthed a paved road leading to the city gates (9th/8th century B.C.), and a large pillared building (7th/6th century B.C.), believed to be a storage house. It is possible that this site was Sihon's Heshbon, destroyed by the Israelites during the time of the conquest.

Archaeological discoveries such as these, which have taken place in the last few years, continue to enrich our understanding of the Bible and strengthen our confidence in its content as a reliable historical document.

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