Kenneth A. Kitchen, *The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1977. Pbk. pp.168.

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Archaeology—a Key to the Past

Ever since Napoleon rallied his troops by the Egyptian Pyramids with the clarion-call, "Fifty centuries look down upon you!", the more spectacular discoveries of archaeology have repeatedly hit the world's headlines. The Egyptian Rosetta Stone in Napoleon's day, huge Assyrian palaces in Queen Victoria's time, the golden splendours of Tutankhamun in Egypt and the royal tombs at Ur in Iraq in the roaring twenties, the Dead Sea Scrolls during the post-war years, and whole series of ancient royal archives on clay tablets, most recently at Syrian Ebla in the seventies—the cavalcade of great finds is almost endless.

But of course, archaeology is not all romance. Most of it is simply persistent, methodical hard work, dealing with everyday materials, to reach results as solid and enlightening as possible on all aspects of ancient life, not just the spectacular highlights.

The Scope of Archaeology

Archaeology' is simply the recovery of man's past by systematically discovering, recording and studying the surviving material remains that he has left behind. In the fullest use of the term, those remains include all kinds of ancient written documents as well as the objects of everyday life, and epochs and cultures without writing. In turn, that much maligned term 'biblical

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archaeology' is a convenient synthetic label for the archaeology of the 'Bible lands' (the ancient Near or Middle East) as drawn upon to elucidate and illustrate the biblical writings.

The Materials of Archaeology

Throughout the ancient biblical Near East, mud or clay was used to make bricks that dried in the warm sun. Such sun-dried mud bricks were by far the cheapest, handiest, most popular material from which people could build their homes, and even kings their palaces. In lands like Mesopotamia (Iraq) where stone was rare, even the greatest temples were of brick, if sometimes faced with kiln-burnt bricks. But in the cliff-lined Nile Valley, the pharaohs could build their temples and tombs of stone. In Palestine and Syria, buildings were commonly of brick on stone foundations. Townships were commonly walled-round for defence, there and elsewhere.

Such mud-brick buildings were highly convenient, but not too permanent, lasting about 25/30 years. Unseasonably wet winters, accidental fires, or demolition by invading enemies could

quickly turn houses, palaces or whole towns into desolate ruins. Then if the inhabitants decided to rebuild, they often just levelled-off the debris and built on top. Thus, through the centuries, towns grew ever upwards upon their own former ruins, level by level, age by age. In this way, early Jericho reached a height of 70 feet before Joshua's time (by the 13th century BC) above its Neolithic beginnings some 8000 years earlier. Beth Shan and Megiddo reached similar elevations above their prehistoric foundations.

At periods when a town-site was deserted, driving wind, sand and rains would often erode away the uppermost levels of the abandoned houses and walls. Thus, at Ur, the town of Neo-Babylonian times was largely swept away (attested mainly by burials), while 20 feet depth of human occupation-remains had been lost from ancient Babylonian Eshnunna (Tell Asmar) before it was excavated. Likewise, in barely 150 years (*c*.1550-1400 BC), most of the Middle Bronze Age town of Jericho and of its defence-walls (with 20 feet of scarp below them) were similarly eroded away. Small wonder, then, that from the still higher Late Bronze levels (Joshua's time), scarcely any traces have survived the 400 years of scouring and denudation that followed their destruction.

Buildings are not all. Age by age, fashions and fads changed in life's everyday tools and furnishings, especially pottery which survives in quantity. So, in the successive ruin-levels of ancient towns, the pottery and other effects vary through the ages. Similar levels

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in other sites enable us to link up the sequences in whole regions. Links with written records (found in particular levels) enable us to tie in the archaeological sequences with the flow of known history.

The Methods and Limits of Archaeology

Therefore, to recover the material history and successive lifestyles of the peoples of antiquity, the archaeologist excavates the town-mounds of the ancient Near East, beginning at the top levels, left by the last occupants, and working his way downward through ever-earlier periods of settlement to reach bedrock on which the first inhabitants had built. Several floor-levels (indicating 'rebuilds') might belong to one longer cultural epoch; he observes the changes in styles of pottery and other artifacts, buildings, etc., period by period. Then, he can write up the cultural history of the site in proper order, from its beginning to its final end. If written documents from the site or elsewhere make it possible to tie in destructions and 'rebuilds' with known history, then the archaeological and literary histories supplement each other. From prehistory following the last 'Ice Age' or 'Wet Period', down to Roman times, it has been possible to chart the rise and variations of some 10,000 years of human culture and civilization in the ancient Near East. To assist the archaeologist to extract the maximum amount of useful information from a 'dig', all manner of scientific techniques have been devised. Soil-analysis, pollen-grain analysis, tests on human and animal remains, etc., can give us some idea of the climate, natural vegetation, crops, wild and domestic animals, people's diet, at various periods. Carbon-14 counts (measuring the amount of radio-active carbon emission from organic matter) can help to assess an approximate date for the samples tested, although complications can arise from contamination of samples, and so on.

Needless to say, practical 'digging' is often far more tricky than this 'ideal' outline might suggest, and it requires considerable expertise. Decayed mud-brick walls can sometimes barely be distinguished at first from the mud in which they are buried. Styles of pottery sometimes changed only slowly, making precise dating difficult. Foundation-trenches, and storage or rubbish-pits cut from one level down into another can mix up the remains from two or more different levels. An undulating town-site can result in late levels in one part being physically lower down than early levels in another part. These and other pitfalls frequently beset the field archaeologist.

Problems of other kinds can affect the results reached by excavations. The gaps in the record caused by erosion were noted

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above. And normally, only a minute area of an entire site can ever be dug, especially if explored to any great depth. Thus, ancient Ashdod comprises about 70 acres of lower city area and about 20 acres of acropolis, some 90 acres in all—but only l½ acres of this surface (less than 2%) has been excavated. At Tell Beit Mirsim (possibly ancient Debir) about one-quarter of the surface-area of this much smaller site was excavated, but only parts of that quarter down to bedrock. At Tell el-Areini (once thought to be Gath), the excavated areas cover barely 4% of the whole site, and likewise in the Early Bronze city at Arad. Only about a tenth of the area of Et-Tell (often supposed to be Ai) has been dug, and similarly at Tell el-Ajjul (Beth Eglayim). While surface-potsherds from the slopes of a mound can give valuable indications of the periods during which a former ancient town was inhabited, only full-scale excavation can reveal the total occupation-history. But as even 'full-scale' excavations rarely touch more than a fraction of a site—as we have just seen—important features can still be missed by accident. If levels of a particular period occur in only one part of a site—a part not dug—then the archaeologist's 'record' will appear to show a gap in that town's history, much as when erosion has taken its toll. If one digs 5% of a site, one must expect to miss 95% (and 100%, if it is the wrong site!). Sometimes, adjoining cemeteries can point to the artificiality of a 'gap'.

Therefore, the information we obtain by excavation can often be very incomplete. Ancient Gibeon is a good example. Despite the narration in Joshua (9:3-10:2) which presupposes a settlement there in the Late Bronze Age, the first three seasons of a very successful excavation by Professor J. B. Pritchard yielded not a scrap from that period other than a stray Cypriot sherd or two. Only in the fourth season were found a handful of fine Late Bronze Age tombs, refuting the supposed contradiction between Joshua and 'archaeology'. Moreover, those four busy seasons dealt with barely a twentieth of Gibeon's surface area and thus could not possibly claim to be exhaustive. Whether eroded beyond recall or still safely buried, a Late Bronze township evidently once existed at Gibeon.[1] Some may ask, why is so little dug on these ancient sites? The answer is threefold. In the first place, the cost of excavating an entire site from top to bottom, complete, is prohibitive. Millionaires do not exactly tumble over each other to make it otherwise! Secondly, it is often wise in any case to leave good-sized areas of a site intact for later generations to tackle with the hindsight of better knowledge or

[1] References given in Kitchen, *Ancient Orient & Old Testament*, 1966, p. 65, nn. 29-31; cf. also the admirably cautious remarks by J. B. Pritchard, *Gibeon Where the Sun Stood Still*, 1962, pp. 157-158.

improved techniques. Thirdly, in some cases, the results throughout an entire level are so uniform that total excavation would give only repetitive results not commensurate with the

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cost and time involved. However, this can only be certainly determined by wide testing.

How unreliable such 'gaps' in the record can be may also be illustrated at a biblical site across the Jordan in the land of Moab. One of the most famous towns of ancient Moab was Dibon, now represented by the mounds at Dhiban, where the renowned inscription of King Mesha of Moab was found over a century ago. Excavations at Dhiban produced definite traces of the Early Bronze Age township (3rd millennium BC), then practically nothing for the entire 2nd millennium (Middle and Late Bronze Ages). From the 1st millennium (Iron Age), parts of the citadel of the dynasty of Mesha were unearthed, plus remains of later epochs. Now, from such a gap for (e.g.) the Late Bronze Age, the unwary might be led to conclude that biblical mentions of Dibon no later than the 13th century BC (Late Bronze Age) as in Numbers 21:30 and 32:3,34 or Joshua 13:9,17, were in fact errors or anachronisms. But they would be mistaken. Because, in that very period, the pharaoh Ramesses II conquered Dibon a few decades before the Israelites reached it, and celebrated his victory in sculptured reliefs in his temple at Luxor in Upper Egypt.[2] Thus, Dibon certainly existed in the Late Bronze Age according to first-hand inscriptional evidence, evidence which supplements and corrects the quite inadequate results obtained from digging at Dibon itself. Future diggers may do better.

Then, there is the phenomenon of 'site-shift'. The citizens of an ancient town sometimes could no longer live comfortably on the crest of their tall mound; or destruction made a new start desirable; or new prosperity led to expansion beyond the old citadel. In such cases a new town or suburb was built either adjoining the old mound or at some little distance from it. Such a development could occur more than once. At some later date, in harder times, a much-reduced population might seek security by reoccupying the top of the long-defunct high mound. For modern investigators, the practical result is that a site appears not to have been lived in at certain periods of history—whereas, in fact, people had simply 'moved down the road' and actually lived nearby during the supposedly 'missing' periods. Thus, Old Testament Jericho (now Tell es-Sultan) was abandoned from Hellenistic times, and settlement moved to near the springs of Ain-Sultan, onto the site which became modern Jericho (Er-Riha). But in Hellenistic/Roman times, palaces and residential villas were built at a third site nearby (Tulul Abu el-Alaiq). So, today, there are three 'Jerichos'.[3] Consequent shifts of the ancient name can thus be deceptive. A century ago, Umm Lakis seemed to be Lachish by its name—but was in fact not

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occupied in biblical times. The real Lachish of antiquity is represented by the massive early site at Tell ed-Duweir, confirmed by the Lachish ostraca found there. Much more recently, when Tell Hesban in Transjordan was excavated in hopes of finding ancient Heshbon, little but one wall and much pottery-fill from before the 7th century BC was found, and few buildings earlier than Hellenistic/Roman, in the areas dug. As the owners of the 7th/6th

[2] Published by Kitchen, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 50 (1964), pp. 63-70, cf. pp. 56, 53, Plate III.

[3] For the three sites, see conveniently, K. M. Kenyon and others, in M. Avi-Yonah (ed), *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, II, 1976, pp. 550-575.

century pottery must have had homes of their own, it is clear that most of the Iron Age structures had long since been destroyed, or simply not located. In the case of the Late Bronze Age, the remains may be destroyed or buried (as at Dibon)—or the real Heshbon is actually to be sought elsewhere, at Tell Jalul or Tell el-Umeiri (both occupied in the Bronze Ages[4]), precisely as early Lachish is at Tell ed-Duweir, not Umm Lakis.

Which Site is Which?

How, then, does one identify an ancient site as having once been a particular town mentioned in antiquity? This brings us to the relationship between the evidence of written history (inscriptions, the Old Testament, etc.) and the material sequences of buildings and cultures unearthed on excavated sites.[5] In Egypt or Babylonia, it is commonplace for ancient cities to be readily identified by name from actual inscriptions discovered in their ruins or to be read on standing temples, etc. This is partly true in Syria also, as at Ugarit, Mari and Ebla for example. But such convenient identification by inscriptions is much rarer in Palestine: examples are Gezer, Gibeon, Hazor and Lachish.

Where inscriptions are lacking, we have to use a combination of different kinds of evidence. From the Bible and other ancient documents, the outline history of an ancient town may be sketched—prominent in some periods, not at others, and so on. These references can be combed through likewise for geographical information—what known places are reputed to be near the one being studied? How near? In what directions? Are there any special natural features mentioned? These may all help to pinpoint the district and location where the appropriate ruin-heap should be found. Sometimes the ancient name has survived in use from antiquity through into modern Arabic. But it may now be attached either to the ancient site, or to only one part of it, or simply to another location nearby, as we have seen already. Therefore this item of evidence has to be used with care. Thus, (El)-Jib reflects ancient Gib(eon), and in fact marks its site; likewise, Dhiban ancient Dibon. But in contrast, oldest Jericho is located at Tell es-Sultan,

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not Er-Riha, and Lachish at Tell ed-Duweir, not Khirbet Umm Lakis several miles to the west.

Finally, when one digs a site considered to fit the criteria, the question arises: does its archaeologically revealed occupation-history match the story told by historical and other written records? (Always allowing, of course, for the pitfalls of erosion, part-occupation, 'site-shift' locally, and the like.) If all the criteria agree, or the apparent 'gaps' in data can be reasonably accounted for, then the identification of the present-day site and the ancient name may be taken as either possible, probable, or near-certain, depending on the quality of the evidence available. In detail, however, limited problems can persist even in the archaeology of known and identified sites. Thus, there is no doubt whatever that ancient Israelite Samaria (later Roman Sebaste) is the site known in modern Arabic as Sebastiyeh. The remains,

[4] Cf. survey reported by L. T. Geraty, *American Schools of Oriental Research Newsletter*, No. 8 (January 1977), p. 12.

[5] On this subject, cf. the salutary remarks by A. F. Rainey, 'Sites, Ancient, Identification of,' in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, 1976, pp. 825-827.

location, name, overall site-history (compared with written history) all agree. Yet, there has been controversy over precisely which individual levels or archaeological strata should correspond to particular reigns. Were the pottery and levels I-II of Omri and Ahab, or of a settlement before theirs? And consequently, was the pottery and level III from the period of Jehu and Jeroboam II, or did it include the preceding reigns of Omri and Ahab's dynasty? Only with additional data or more refined methods can such details be solved in the course of time.

Frequently both the written and archaeological records are incomplete. As we saw above, Dibon is attested in Egyptian texts for the 13th century BC but only later archaeologically. Conversely, Jericho enters history only from Joshua's time (13th century BC onwards), but excavation has taken its story as a town back through thousands of years beyond the 'Bronze Ages' to Chalcolithic and Neolithic phases of early prehistory. Therefore, we need always to use all the resources available, and to allow for the all too often defective state of the evidence—after all, we are dealing with 'the wrecks of time' usually several thousand years after they were live and new!

Inscriptions and Writing in the Biblical World

Writing—the expression of connected ideas and language by visible signs—was first invented in Mesopotamia, sometime before about 3100 BC, followed soon after by its appearance in Egypt. The first writing consisted of pictures—a bird for a bird, a head of grain for that object, and so on. Such pictorial records were all very well

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for keeping accounts—6 fowls, 12 fishes, 100 ears of grain, etc. But to write sounds and express all the ideas of which words and language are capable, required that the pictures should become symbols for sounds (to spell out words), and not just stand for the objects they represented. In English, this would work as follows. A picture-sign of a bee could stand for the sound-group 'bee', 'be'; a picture-sign of a leaf could stand for the syllable(s) 'leaf', 'leef, 'lief'. By putting together the picture of the bee and that of the leaf, one can then spell in two syllables the quite different word 'be-lief,—and 'belief' is a concept which it would be very difficult to draw a picture of!

It was by such means, using their pictures both for things represented and for sounds derived from the names of things, that the early Sumerians began the long history of writing, drawing their pictures on small pads or tablets of clay. Very quickly, the signs drawn on clay became simply groups of wedges, equally distinctive (if less 'artistic') and more easily and quickly written with a reed or 'stylus'. This, from the Latin *cuneus*, 'wedge', is what we term *cuneiform* writing. But the Sumerians were not the only inhabitants of earliest Mesopotamia. During the 3rd millennium BC, the Semitic-speaking Akkadians took over the cuneiform word-signs and syllables to spell out their own, quite different language—Akkadian, from which came the twin dialects Babylonian and Assyrian, all relatives of Hebrew and Arabic with the other Semitic tongues. Rather as we today can use Latin words or word-groups as the equivalent of English phrases (*et cetera* ='and so on'), so the Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians could use Sumerian wordsigns and groups to stand for words in their own

language. They might write the signs LUGAL GAL, king + great, ‘great king’, but read them in their own tongue as sharru rabu, with the same meaning.

In Egypt, the concept of writing, using pictures for things and the sound of their names, may have been taken over from Mesopotamia, by c.3100 BC at the very latest. But here, the signs came to represent only the consonants of words, leaving the vowels to be filled-in by the reader. The Egyptian picture-signs—the famous hieroglyphs—kept their picturesque forms to the end in monumental use. But from the beginning, when written with reedpen and carbon ink upon papyrus, they were modified to a flowing, continuous script (‘hieratic’), the signs running into each other as with our own long-hand handwriting. From the 7th century BC, this cursive script became even more abbreviated (‘demotic’).

From both of these great ancient civilisations, Egypt and Mesopotamia, we have a vast but fragmentary mass of written

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documents. In Egypt, on stone temples and in formal inscriptions, the pharaohs set out their high deeds before the gods—rituals, annual festivals, and historical matters for religious purposes. Their subjects sometimes included biographical details of their own careers in inscriptions in their tomb-chapels or on their statues. But the vast majority of day-to-day writing was in the flowing hieratic script, on papyrus (an early form of ‘paper’, made from strips of the papyrus-plant), or upon spare bits of smooth potsherd or slips of white limestone—known to the Egyptologists as ostraca (singular, ostracon). These were the note-pads and ‘scrap paper’ of the Egyptians, costing nothing. It was upon papyri that fine literature, religious texts (hymns, rites, etc.), and all administrative records were written. Thus, as 90% of Egyptian papyri are lost forever, our losses of knowledge here are enormous. However, budding schoolboy and student scribes did their homework on ostraca, and many lesser administrative jottings likewise were drafted out on these sherds and flakes—so we do recover quite a sampling of all classes of Egyptian writing by this means.

In Mesopotamia, the Sumerians and their Akkadian contemporaries and successors were equally prolific. As clay tablets survive far more frequently than papyri, we have masses of administrative documents, letters and so on, although not equally for all periods (depending on the chances of discovery and excavation). On the tablets, a rich and considerable literature had survived (sometimes rather fragmented, as in Egypt), as well as technical vocabularies of terms, magical compilations (for interpreting omens, etc.) and religious rituals. Monumentally, we have the palace-inscriptions of Assyrian kings, and formal inscriptions of many other rulers.

In the far north-west beyond Mesopotamia and Syria, the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia or Asia Minor (modern Turkey) took over the use of the cuneiform script. The Hittite kings employed it to write their annals and for religious hymns and rituals, literature, legal and administrative documents—largely in their own Indo-European language (cuneiform Hittite, Nesite), partly in related dialects (Luvian, Palaic), partly in Semitic Akkadian for international diplomacy, partly in Hurrian (Horite) for religious purposes, and Hattian likewise. (The last two languages are related neither to each other nor to any of the rest.) From about 1300 BC onwards, they began also to write Luvian in a special hieroglyphic script (‘Hittite hieroglyphs’) on stone monuments—a script used also on state seals.

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In Syria, the spectacular finds at Ebla (cf. Chapter 3) show that, as early as 2300 BC, major city-states could use cuneiform script

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and the Sumerian language for a wide variety of documents, administrative, religious and literary. And at Ebla, the local West-Semitic language was also written in that script. Later, during the 2nd millennium, Syrian states normally used the Akkadian language and cuneiform script. The seaport of Ugarit also wrote its own local West-Semitic language in a cuneiform alphabet. Like the Ebla dialect, Ugaritic is quite closely related to Hebrew, Canaanite and Phoenician. Where Egyptian influence was particularly strong—as at Byblos—the local rulers sometimes set up inscriptions in Egyptian hieroglyphs and language.

But in south Syria and Palestine (Canaan), a still more important script came into use from the mid 2nd millennium BC onwards: the alphabet. This was a set of 26 or 30 simple signs to stand each for a single consonantal sound (perhaps originally, plus any vowel). With this limited set of simple signs to spell any word by its consonantal framework, literacy steadily became possible for a far greater number of people. From the 'Proto-Sinaitic' inscriptions and other fragments (*c*.1500 BC and perhaps even earlier) down through early Canaanite (to 1200/1100 BC), it is possible to chart the history and progress of the alphabet in Phoenicia (from where it reached the Greeks), in Hebrew, Aramaic, and the Transjordanian dialects of Moab, Edom and Ammon, contemporary with the Hebrew kingdoms, exile and return, to Graeco-Roman times. In this group of West-Semitic languages and dialects, the alphabetic inscriptions vary greatly in content. We have royal inscriptions (Byblos, Moab, Ammon; Cilicia), administrative documents and private letters (ostraca, Hebrew and Aramaic), some papyri (mainly Aramaic), and innumerable personal stamp-seals bearing the names of their owners (practically all dialects), use of which presupposes that many people could read enough to distinguish between them. There are inscribed arrow-heads, notations of person, place, or capacity on jar-handles—the list of everyday uses is quite varied. Thus, certainly from c.1100 BC (and probably rather earlier), writing in Canaan, then in Israel, Phoenicia and round about was clearly part of everyday life and not restricted solely to a special scribal elite.[6]

Thus, throughout the ancient biblical world, not one but several systems of writing were in use, often at the same time, and sometimes even in one place (as at Ugarit, or with the Hittites). Whenever writing occurs, we find it used for documents and literature of every conceivable kind. With the advent of the West-Semitic alphabet, the use of writing became possible for many more people during biblical times.

[6] On the alphabet in ancient Israel and beyond, see respectively A. R. Millard, *Biblical Archaeologist* 35 (1972), pp. 97-111, and P. K. McCarter, *Bibl. Archeol*. 37 (1974), pp, 54-68.