

The Other Side of the Jordan

by
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The late professor Paul W. Lapp once wrote that the land of the Bible was still largely unknown to us, notwithstanding all the past and present excavations in and around Palestine.¹ He showed that by cooperation between archaeologists problems could often be solved that otherwise would remain problems for a long time. Yet cooperation in planning and programming the archaeological research in an entire region or country seems to be one of the most unlikely expectations anywhere in the world. This is not only due to nationalistic divisions and the nature of financial resources. It is also due to the fact that often scholars work on one particular period or problem, which they try to solve by means of excavations. This is not to say that such a scholarly purpose is always strictly speaking the motive for an excavation. But at least this ought to be so, if the disconnected nature of so much archaeological research is to be justified. The question is then whether there is not a more general purpose behind these activities that lead to excavations. And there is, or rather there are some major trends which can be broadly defined as follows:

1. The study of the great monuments which date from classical times to the great age of Muslim architecture.
2. The study of the biblical period which is often taken to begin at least ca. 2000 B.C..
3. The study of the prehistoric periods.

This division also divides the archaeo-

logists into categories of interest and to a certain extent into different worlds. Scholars of the Classical, early Christian and Islamic tradition consider the Jordanian territory as one of the important aspects of their field to be studied in connection with the other geographical areas. Those of the prehistoric Near Eastern cultures find in Jordan some highly important sites like Beiddha, Jericho, Teleilat Ghassul, and prehistoric stone monuments. However their world is also connected with wide areas between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean.

Archaeologists of the biblical field move in a much more limited area: that of Palestine and its immediate surroundings, with the exception of those scholars who study the earliest Christian epoch. The activities of this group of biblical field archaeologists are our primary concern for the moment. Do they have an overall interest and how do they choose their objectives? The archaeologist whose main concern is the biblical period is often also interested in the other fields of excavation. He may occasionally excavate an Early Bronze Age site or even an earlier one. He knows the pottery and probably some flint industries of those earlier periods. Yet prehistoric archaeology which is rapidly becoming a very specialised branch of Near Eastern research can no longer be considered a spare time occupation for the archaeologist of historical periods. Whoever excavates a Chalcolithic site today and does not bring home a pollen diagram² has made a grave

(1) P. W. Lapp, "Palestine: Known but Mostly Unknown," in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, XXVI (1963), no. 4, pp. 121-134.

(2) G. W. Dimbley, "Pollen Analysis," in E. Pydoko,

The Scientist and Archaeology, (London-New York, 1963), pp. 56-79; id. in *Science in Archaeology*, (Bristol, 1963), pp. 139-149; id., *Plants and Archaeology*, (London, 1967).

mistake, which a prehistorian would not make. The earlier the period one is excavating, the more urgent the need for ecological studies, including analysis of soils, animal and vegetable remains. This aspect is neglected to a very large extent by archaeologists of the historical periods. It does not belong yet to the tradition of their excavation practices, and so they tackle prehistoric sites with lack of experience. One can however argue that this ecological research ought to be part of the routine work on later sites too. We often are inclined to forget that an Iron Age site, which belongs to the historical period is a prehistoric site from the purely technical point of view. There is no technical difference in the archaeological approach to the excavation of a Chalcolithic, Early Bronze Age, or an Iron Age site. Every animal bone that can be identified should be kept on an excavation of an Iron Age site. What is often kept are bones found in or near a sanctuary. But this is done for the purpose of the study of ritual. Do we not want to know the diet of the population? Frequency charts of pottery like the one published in Deir 'Allā Vol. I³ show at which rate pottery was used and what the ratio is between the different types. In the same way one could discover the ratio of different animals that were bred or hunted for food.⁴

This is one example of neglect of an aspect of the evidence which is available but overlooked. This example serves the purpose of our argument in that it illustrates that excavators of the so-called biblical period in Jordan have something in mind which narrows and focuses their interest on select archaeological information, resulting in neglect of other. Why should bones from a sanctuary be kept and those found in a courtyard of a house not? The answer is simple. The ritual of the

sanctuary seems more important than the ways of life of the persons who performed the ritual. It should be clear that one would gain by a comparison of the animals that were found in the sanctuary with those that were present in the community but not used for sacrifice. In itself this is reason enough for keeping all the "diagnostic" bones found during excavation. If one only keeps the bones from sacrifice one clearly does this for comparison with facts known from literary sources. The chances of missing other evidence concerning the ritual, for instance the offering of birds are serious enough. Archaeologists have found the lamb, known to have been part of the Israelite rituals, but not the animals that were used in the offering ritual which they are actually trying to reconstruct. Or are they? Are archaeologists seriously attempting to study the ancient history, the economy, the population of a site or in fact only trying "to fit in" what is found in evidence already known from existing literary sources, like the Old Testament? Trying to identify sites with places known from the Old Testament is a reasonable enough procedure. But trying to use the Old Testament as an index for the interpretation of what one finds at a site is an erroneous way of digging altogether. The fallacy of this methodology has been very lucidly demonstrated by H. J. Eggers⁵ and others.

That it is a mistaken procedure can be easily demonstrated from the excavations at Tell Deir 'Allā. I refer only to my own finds, but other examples could be cited from both the East and the West Bank. Tell Deir 'Allā is commonly identified with Succoth⁶, mentioned several times in the Old Testament. I have suggested the possibility of another identification, but I cannot find conclusive evidence for it.⁷ But the identification with Succoth becomes extremely difficult in the light of the archaeological finds and their interpretation.

(3) H. J. Franken and J. Kalsbeek, *Excavations at Tell Deir 'Allā*, (Leiden, 1969), vol. I, p. 242.

(4) F. E. Zeuner, *A History of Domesticated Animals*, London, 1963; D. Brothwell and E. Higgs, *Science in Archaeology*, (Bristol, 1963), section II.

(5) H. J. Eggers, *Einführung in die Vorgeschichte*, (München, 1959), chapter IV.

(6) N. Glueck, "Explorations in Eastern Palestine," in *AASOR*, XXV-XXVIII (1951), no. IV, pp. 347-350.

(7) Franken-Kalsbeek, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Notwithstanding this situation one finds that from a purely dogmatic type of reasoning Aharoni has to state that Deir ʿAllā is Succoth.⁸ I admit that it is a wonderful site, but I cannot see what was so wonderful about biblical Succoth. Was it a town, a village, a piece of land, a region, a camping place? But no clear answer is given by Aharoni, or by any other Old Testament scholar, as far as I am aware of. Obviously the Bible is not clear about it. In fact, Deir ʿAllā was a sanctuary in the Late Bronze Age. In the Iron Age it was still a holy place and from the 7th century we have again a large sanctuary. In the Early Iron Age a village was attached to it. The question of the archaeologist to the biblical scholar is therefore: does this main aspect agree with what is known about biblical Succoth? Can one interpret the biblical words: "Jacob made a booth for his sheep at Succoth" (would anybody in his senses build booth for sheep in the Valley?) as a euphemism and read: Jacob built a large sanctuary for his god(s)? If not, it seems reasonable to suppose that Deir ʿAllā is situated in the region of Succoth, but is not to be identified with it. In stead of asking whether the archaeological evidence fits in with the biblical evidence about Succoth, the archaeologist has to ask whether the biblical evidence fits in with what he finds. This seems to be one and the same question, but it is not. The existence of a very large sanctuary at Deir ʿAllā can no longer be denied. Does the biblical evidence concerning Succoth "fit in" with that? It is not the archaeological evidence which is under discussion but the interpretation of the biblical text. Here is a problem for the Old Testament scholars, not for the excavator who has brought to light one important aspect of life in the Late Bronze and Iron Age in Transjordan. These are in fact two ways open. Either one follows closely the

evidence excavated from the tell, or one tries to strengthen a myth. The example of identification of the unknown with the known and the myth that is at stake is not an isolated one.

What is the crux of the matter? Largely the fact that archaeology of the pre-Christian historical period is dominated by a myth. This is the myth created in Old Testament Jerusalem about the countries surrounding ancient Israel. The stories that were told about those countries, about the journeys of tribes through them, and the wars they fought. The places they once conquered were gradually put in a framework that was largely designed to serve religious and educational purposes. The "verification" of the historical truth of these traditions did not come so much from the past, it came from the religious interpretation of the history of the people, and it was shaped in the royal and religious centres. It was true because these traditions described the great deeds of the god of Israel. The view expressed by the prophets of the Old Testament became the textbook and educational outlook after the Babylonian exile. And in a large measure this view still serves as point of departure for the archaeologists who work on the East Bank of the Jordan.

One has only to read Glueck's "Explorations in Trans Jordan"⁹ to find how from ca. 2000 B.C. his whole interpretation of the history of the country is based on biblical data. It begins with the destruction of the so-called M.B. I civilization, which he attributes to the raid of Chedorlaomer, leader of five kings.¹⁰ After that Jordan lay waste until shortly before the Israelite tribes crossed Edom, Moab and some regions farther north to reach Palestine. The kingdoms they met on their way had just been established. Glueck has accordingly dated his finds to these biblical-historical events which in fact are

(8) Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, (London, 1967), pp. 241-242.

(9) Cf. fn. 6; also D. Winton Thomas, *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, (Oxford, 1967), p. 429ff.

(10) Genesis 14:5ff.

part of the religious tradition of ancient Israel. One wonders which came first a biblical date for Chedorlaomer or an archaeological date for the end of the M.B. I civilization. Did Glueck find clear evidence for the dates of two events; (a) the Chedorlaomer raid, and (b) the destruction of the M.B. I civilization so that he could say that they coincided? Or did he just guess that the M.B. I stopped in Transjordan at the same time that it stopped in Palestine and guess simultaneously that this coincided with the time of Abraham and Chedorlaomer, and that this king was able to destroy a whole country in one raid?¹¹ All this even though we have no fixed dates for these events and no idea of how and when Transjordan became deserted!¹² Glueck suggested the identification like he suggested the beginning of the Moabite kingdom—not on archaeological facts but on biblical information from “Jerusalem”. How wrong is the present day Israeli interpretation of the Arabs? Is not their view largely dominated by the present conflict and would it have been so different in antiquity? Glueck’s influence on biblical studies related to “Eastern Palestine” is still very strong. His view of the history of Transjordan is still hailed as basic for further studies. G. Ernest Wright says for example: “. . . in the main Glueck’s conclusions hold true because they are based on a wide sampling from so many hundreds of hitherto unknown sites. Various skeptics still exist, but thus far the evidence adducted has failed to change the overall picture materially.”¹³ In fact much archaeological evidence contradicts Glueck’s conclusions. The criticism expressed above and below is a genuine archaeological criticism about his method of interpretation with the

aid of literary sources written from a biased historical conception.¹⁴

Turning back for a moment to the myth of Aharoni about Succoth. Can Deir ‘Allā be claimed as an Old Testament Israelite site when it turns out that it was a large sanctuary dating from Early Bronze Age to Persian times which never cared for the religion of the Israelites but went on in its own “pagan” ways, while being cursed by Israelite priests and prophets? But what do we know in fact? We know of a religious, educational view of responsible centres in Jerusalem. We know hardly anything of the views of religious and educational centres in Edom, Moab, Ammon and these ancient kingdoms. What did they think of Jerusalem? Our argument is this: As long as finds in Jordan are interpreted in the light of the Old Testament traditions archaeology will not be able to reconstruct the past.

Basically the mistake is that archaeologists do not realise that evidence from the soil is totally independent from any ideological interpretation. A good example is the early communist ideological correction of the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age classification. According to the ideologists in Russia it had to be: 1. the forming of clans, 2. life in tribes, 3. the disintegration of the tribes, 4. the feudal period. For educational purposes the exhibition in the museums were arranged following this theme, but did it reflect the true historical sequence? Behind it all is the idea that archaeology can be used to serve political purposes.

Another sad mistake made by Glueck is that on the basis of his archaeological research he dimly concluded that bedouin life was totally destructive for civilization. In his view it is again and again the savage tent-dweller

(11) “Certainly they (that is ‘numerous settlements’) do not seem to have been sufficiently confederated to withstand the onslaught of the organized army which moved against them, and which was able in one swift march through the land to lay waste all of them,” cf. N. Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan*, (New Haven, 1940), p. 125.

(12) K. M. Kenyon, *Canaanites and Amorites*, (London, 1966), p. 64.

(13) G. E. Wright in J. Sanders, *Near Eastern Archae-*

ology in the Twentieth Century, (New York, 1970), p. 31.

(14) An analysis of Glueck’s historical conclusions is found in H. J. Franken, “Einiges über die Methode von archäologischen Oberflächenuntersuchungen,” in A. Kuschke and E. Kutsch, *Archäologie und Altes Testament*, Tübingen, 1970. Cf. also W. J. A. Power and H. J. Franken in *Vetus Testamentum*, 1971 (forthcoming) where a discrepancy is demonstrated between what Glueck found and what he actually published.

who threatens to destroy the civilized centres. Since his survey coincided with the period in which world Zionism was prospecting the country for its agricultural possibilities¹⁵ one can easily understand that his interpretation was influenced by the actualities of the day. Is it so certain that the M.B. I civilization was mainly based on agriculture and that this was the case for the Iron Age Kingdoms? It is one thing to project a plan for the future into the past as a fixed peg for interpretation of antiquities, but it is quite a different thing to apply meticulously the rules of prehistoric research for each period under study. Each period has its own problems and for each period the archaeologist needs at least a good deal of factual evidence from excavation, before he can be sure that the picture is reliable. One has only to point to the difficulties of tracing the settlement of Israelite tribes in Palestine, how they adapted themselves to sedentary life and how long it took them to organize themselves to illustrate the fact that no surface exploration can possibly solve these problems. Glueck has brought to light a great deal of useful information, but his interpretation lacks both chronological and historical precision. Thus it is useless for the historian. Glueck definitely viewed the land from "Jerusalem". It is not his fault that he was unaware of the possibilities of modern precision in archaeological research. The modern archaeologist cannot follow his sweeping generalizations. It is no longer possible to jump to conclusions by equating biblical views with archaeological finds, nor is it possible to take a western interpretation of bedouin life as an explanation for what happened in the second millennium B.C.

The soil of Jordan is still full of secrets concerning the history of the land. The temple mound of Deir eAllā is only one of the sur-

prises, indicating that the history of Jordan has to be studied independently from foreign sources. How would a history of Palestine look if it were written and interpreted exclusively from the ancient Egyptian sources. The "Israel" of the Mernephta stele would have been taken as one of the petty kingdoms but there would hardly be any information at all about the nature of the Israelite kingdom. No doubt the Philistines would take up much more space in such a history than the Israelite tribes, of which most or all of the names would have been forgotten. Glueck's *Other side of the Jordan* does not give us the "other side" of the history of Jordan. And archaeology does not give either side. It does not give opinions of leaders of people, unless in the form of inscriptions. Otherwise it tells a tale about the existence of cultures and the fate of those cultures in broad outline. Before the archaeologist can even begin to outline what ancient Israel had to do with these cultures, he has to know them. The archaeologist who claims that the Bible provides the outline is wrong. The Bible does not give anything like enough archaeological information to trace such a cultural history. Archaeology does not serve the purpose of confirming what the historian thinks he knows about a country. It serves the purpose of finding fresh evidence, and it is a means of testing the reliability of written sources.

As an example of prejudiced archaeological research one more conclusion of Glueck is mentioned. According to Glueck Islam's coming to Jordan put an end to the Byzantine civilization in this area. Comparatively speaking extremely little archaeological work has been done on the Arabic sites that are found all over the country. Consequently there is a black spot in the archaeological records, apart from the few centres of Islamic administration. For the Jordan Valley one can now show that

(15) Cf. N. H. Bein's article in *Jerusalem Post Weekend Magazine*, August 9, 1968, about negotiations in Transjordan for the settlement of Jewish colonies there.

the end of intensive occupation on the East side must have coincided with the beginning of the Turkish administration. Up till those times there was a very intensively cultivated valley and countless ruins of *sukar* mills testify to the flourishing farming culture in Medieval times. Glueck either neglected or was unaware of this influence of Islam when he drew his conclusions. The study of the sedentary population in Medieval times and its relation to the Arab bedouin tribes by archaeological means is in-

dispensable for the understanding of the whole history. Here we find the farmer and the herdsman in comparatively recent times where they can be studied more closely than in more remote times. But it is not the biblical period. Is it therefore less important? Jordan contains in its soil a good deal of the other side of the biblical historical narrative. When archaeologists concerned with the Old Testament want to find evidence for further study of the relation of ancient Israel with this country, they have to look for this "other side of the Jordan".

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