

Out of the earth

News and views from the world of archaeology

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Household shrines to Asherah

AS HAS BEEN pointed out in these pages before, the various references in the AV to 'groves' are in fact references to the Canaanite mother goddess Asherah. Excavations have unearthed a number of examples of household shrines to Asherah, in the form of miniature temples. Other examples have come to light via the antiquities market—the private selling of antiquities illegally looted from sites not yet properly excavated. These shrines have certain common features: two columns in the form of trees; lions at the base of the columns; and a dove perched over the entrance, as well as a small statue (figurine) of the goddess herself.

The use of the tree image is common in ancient paganism and, on the basis that much of the imagery of false worship is based on the gross distortion of the true, probably goes back to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. I do not know why the AV translators used 'grove' to translate the Hebrew *asherah*, but I wonder if this links at all with this use of the tree symbol (usually a palm). The use of the dove as a symbol may also go back to the role of the dove in proving to Noah that the waters covering the earth had dried up (Gen. 8:11).

There does not seem to be any reference to these household shrines to Asherah in the Bible, which is concerned with

the eradication of the public worship of Asherah, along with the worship of Baal. However, those who publicly worshipped Asherah would also have wanted to worship her in their own homes, hence the miniature shrines. By having such shrines people would have believed that they were under the protection of the mother goddess. This practice is still around today in the form of the images to the Virgin Mary that many devout Roman Catholics have in their homes or, as we have seen in Malta, on the walls of their houses.

The shrines that have been discovered are thought to relate mainly to the eighth or ninth centuries B.C. Significantly, this is about the time of King Ahab, when his Phoenician wife Jezebel was instrumental in bringing in the worship of Baal and Asherah (1 Kgs. 16:31-33). Recently a house shrine has come to light which contains a double seat. It belongs to a private collector and its origin is unknown. Presumably the double seat was intended for Baal as well as Asherah, for they were worshipped as a couple. The article referred to below, after reviewing the subject of the shrines in general, concentrates particularly on this shrine, pursuing a theory that Yahweh and Asherah were worshipped as a couple. No reason is given why it should not have been Baal and Asherah, although, shocking though the thought is to us, the wickedness of Israel was such that they were quite capable of seeking to mix

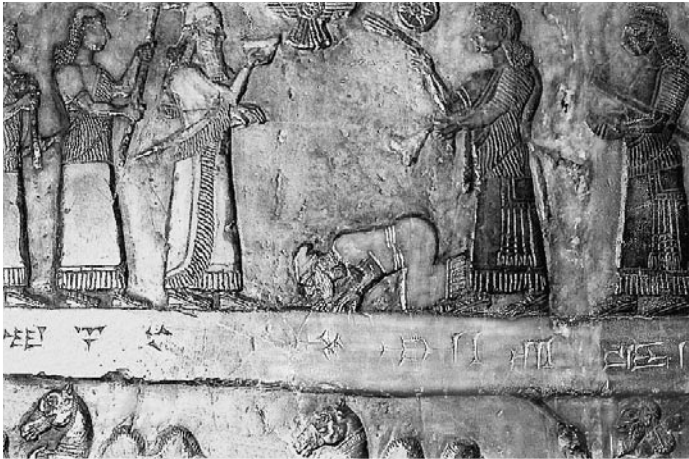
the worship of the true and the false by presenting Asherah as the wife of Yahweh.

Source: "A temple built for two", William G. Dever, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Mar.-Apr. 2008.

Archelaus' palace excavated

WHEN Herod the Great died (conventionally 4 B.C.), the area over which he ruled (Palestine and parts of Syria) was divided under his will between three of his sons and a daughter. Judea and Samaria were left to Archelaus, who wanted to take over Herod's title as king but had to get the permission of the Emperor Augustus. Consequently he went to Rome to obtain this.

The rule of Archelaus was an oppressive one right from the very start, however; hence Joseph, on hearing in Egypt of the death of Herod, went to Galilee, ruled by another son, Antipas, rather than going back to Judea (Mt. 2:22). A delegation of Jewish leaders went to Rome to plead with Augustus not to appoint Archelaus as king, an incident reminiscent of the way Jesus, thirty years later, began his parable of the pounds (Lk. 19:14). Augustus compromised, making Archelaus ethnarch instead of king. His rule continued to be oppressive, and, after another Jewish delegation went to Rome to complain in A.D. 6, he was deposed by Augustus, who exiled him in Gaul and installed a Roman governor over Judea.



Jehu giving obeisance to Shalmaneser III.

With acknowledgements to the British Museum

Herod the Great was, of course, also an oppressive tyrant, and is referred to as 'Great' because of his extensive building works, notably the temple in Jerusalem. Archelaus began to follow in his father's footsteps, building himself a palace in the Jordan Valley just north of Jericho, referred to on later maps as Archelais. These maps enabled the site to be located, and excavations have been taking place for the last ten years.

In A.D. 41 Herod Antipas' son Agrippa was allowed by the Romans to rule the whole area that his grandfather Herod the Great had ruled. This ended three years later when he was struck down by an intestinal disease, a punishment from God according to Acts 12:23. During his short reign he developed Archelais further, building a road house for pilgrims going from Galilee to Jerusalem for the feasts. This has now been excavated and has proved to be four acres in extent. To avoid clashes with the Samaritans, the Jews used the longer Jordan valley route, and the road house provided somewhere to stay the night before

going through Jericho to make the final ascent to Jerusalem. Jesus, of course, took this route for his final journey to Jerusalem, spending the night at Jericho with Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-5).

Source: "Archelaus builds Archelais", Hananya Hizmi, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jul.-Aug. 2008.

How many kings of Israel and Judah are mentioned in contemporary sources outside the Bible?

THE above question was posed in a recent issue of the magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review*. The answer given is sixteen, a remarkable testimony to the way discoveries that support the accuracy of the Bible have built up over the years.

Firstly there are the kings that are mentioned in the Assyrian and Babylonian records. The following kings of Israel are mentioned in the Assyrian records:

- Omri (1 Kgs. 16:23)
- Ahab (v. 29)
- Jehu (2 Kgs. 9:14)
- Joash/Jehoash (13:10)

- Menahem (15:17)
- Pekah (v. 27)
- Hoshea (17:1).

The following kings of Judah are mentioned in either the Assyrian or Babylonian records:

- Ahaz (2 Kgs. 16:1)
- Hezekiah (18:1)
- Manasseh (21:1)
- Jehoiachin (24:8).

An additional three names can be obtained from the Tel Dan Stela, discovered a few years ago in excavations at Dan, this being a Syrian record of wars between Israel and Syria:

David in the form of a reference to the house of David

Jehoram/Joram of Israel (2 Kgs. 3:1)

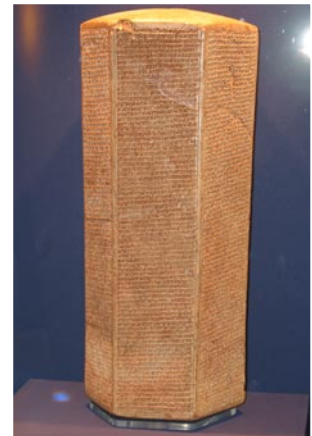
Ahaziah of Judah (8:25).

In more recent times a number of seals relating to royal officials of Israel and Judah have come to light. These add at least two names to the list:

Azariah/Uzziah (2 Kgs. 14:21)

Jeroboam, probably Jeroboam II (v. 23).

Source: Feature in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sep.-Oct. 2008.



Picture: Lawrence Cave

The Assyrian account of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in the days of Hezekiah.

With acknowledgements to the British Museum

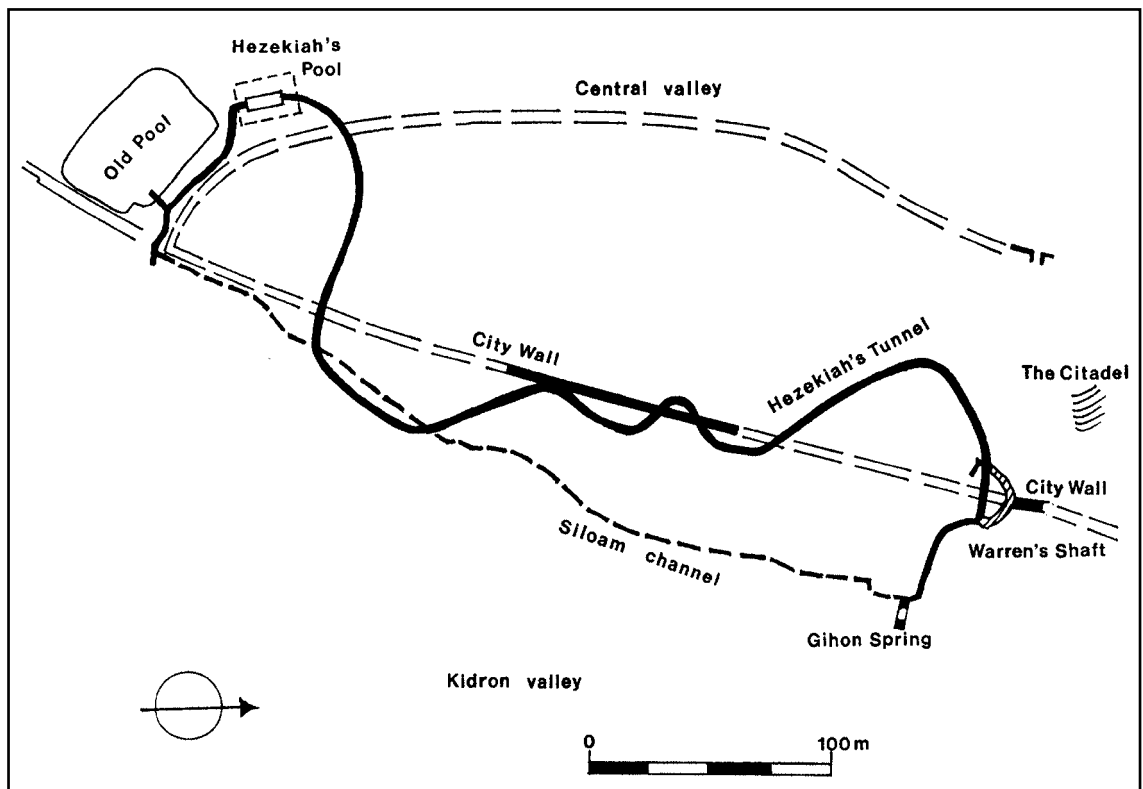
A fresh look at Hezekiah's Tunnel

THE discovery in the mid-nineteenth century of a 1,700-foot-long tunnel channelling water from the Gihon Spring in Jerusalem's Kidron Valley to the Siloam Pool at the bottom end of the City of David is one of the most fascinating discoveries ever made in the land of Israel. It was remarkable enough in its own right, and its identification with the water channel referred to in the Bible as having been constructed in the reign of Hezekiah made it all the more fascinating (2 Chron. 32:30; Isa. 22:11). Interest in the tunnel was further enhanced by the discovery in 1880 of an inscription on the wall of the tunnel describing its construction, in particular how the tunnellers started from both ends and met in the middle.

There were, however, two questions that arose. Firstly, why does the tunnel meander so much (a direct tunnel between the Gihon Spring and the Siloam Pool would only be 1,050 feet long)? Secondly, if the tunnellers started from each end, how did they manage to meet in the middle? An answer to these questions was first proposed by Brother Henry Sulley, writing in the *Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund* in 1929. He suggested that the tunnellers followed a small stream that already flowed through a fissure in the limestone rock. This was widely accepted by archaeologists who later investigated the area, but has now been challenged by two Israeli geologists, Aryeh Shimron and Amos Frumkin, who have carried out a careful and detailed investigation of the tunnel.

Shimron and Frumkin have come up with several problems with the existing theory:

- 1 The place where the tunnellers met is readily identified by the change in direction of the pickaxe marks on the wall. In this area the tunnel twists and turns more than in any other part in the tunnel, indicating problems meeting up with each other. If both groups were following an existing stream, however, why the difficulty?
- 2 Near to the point of meeting, there are two side tunnels that run for a few feet and stop, and the rudiments of a third. These indicate that three times the tunnellers realised they were going wrong and had to change direction.
- 3 The tunnel walls are plastered in places, and there





Inside Hezekiah's Tunnel.

are traces of several layers of plaster having been put on at different times. At one point a small twig was found in the bottom layer of plaster, and carbon-14 dating has been used to date it to about the time of Hezekiah. On top of the plaster there are limestone deposits from the water running through. There are no such deposits below the oldest plaster, indicating that there was no existing fissure through which water ran and which was followed to construct the tunnel.

- 4 Water creates fissures in limestone by percolating through joints and cracks. The two geologists discovered that joints and cracks run across the line of the tunnel, not in the same direction as the tunnel.

How then did the tunnellers manage to meet? Shimron and Frumkin suggest they were guided by people hammering the rock on the surface and gaining a response from the tunnellers. They have carried

out experiments that show that such hammering can be heard at depths of up to fifty feet. The changes in direction that occur happened when the tunnellers realised that they could no longer hear the hammering, and moved in a direction they knew would take them to where the surface was nearer.

Support for this theory is seen in a statement on the inscription regarding the meeting point, which says, "And the height of the rock above the heads of the labourers was 100 cubits", indicating that they knew where they were in relation to the surface.

As with all theories, this new idea may well be challenged, but one thing remains clear. The construction of the tunnel was a remarkable engineering feat, far ahead of anything else discovered from those times, as well as providing important support for the accuracy of the Bible.

Source: "Sound proof: How Hezekiah's tunnellers met", Hershel Shanks, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sep.-Oct. 2008.

New tunnel discovered at the City of David

2SAMUEL 5:8 records that David's soldiers captured Jerusalem by using "the gutter", evidently some kind of underground passage. In the nineteenth century Charles Warren discovered a shaft at the Gihon Spring at the foot of the City of David, and a sloping tunnel leading to it at the top, and this was thought to be "the gutter" used to conquer the city, although climbing up the rough-hewn vertical shaft would have been difficult.

Continuing excavations at the City of David have recently revealed another tunnel which the leader of the dig, Dr Eilat Mazar, thinks may have been the means by which the city was captured, rather than Warren's Shaft, as it has become known. The tunnel was discovered underneath the remains of a large stone structure already identified by Dr Mazar as David's palace. However, the tunnel appears to be older than the palace and was integrated into the structure of the palace when it was built. It is thought that the tunnel was used to channel water into a pool adjacent to the passage.

At present only the first fifty yards or so of the tunnel is accessible, the rest being blocked by fallen stones and debris. Dr Mazar's excavations have unearthed a number of interesting features which go back to the time of the Old Testament kingdom of Israel, and, as they continue downwards in this important area, we can expect other items of interest to be unearthed.

Source: "First-Temple water tunnel uncovered in the City of David", Etgar Lefkovits, *Jerusalem Post Christian Edition*, Dec. 2008.