

# Out of the earth

## News from the world of archaeology

Tony Benson

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### New evidence for ancient Edom (continued)

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**I**N A PREVIOUS “Out of the earth” I referred to recent archaeological discoveries confirming that Edom was a nation earlier than previously thought, thus supporting the fact that the Bible refers to Edom as a nation with a history parallel to that of Israel ([Sept. 2005, p. 361](#)). A more extensive account of these discoveries has now appeared in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, written by the excavators of the site. They say, “We have discovered a degree of social complexity in the land of Edom that demonstrates the weak reed on the basis of which a number of scholars have scoffed at the idea of a state or complex chiefdom in Edom at this early period [the time of King David]—and by extension a state in Judah”.

The excavations have been carried out by a joint American/Jordanian team at Khirbat en-Nahas, which means ‘Ruins of Copper’. This site is on the eastern side of the rift valley that leads south from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea, and is thus in Jordan. It has proved to be a quite extensive copper-refining centre. Previous archaeological investigations have been in the hilly country to the east. Here British archaeologist Crystal Bennett has worked for many years, and it is from her that has emanated the widely accepted view that there was no nation

of Edom in existence as early as the time of David.

However, it would seem that she simply did not excavate in the right places, and also made a major error of judgement. At a place called Umm el-Biyara she found a seal impression of a king of Edom named Qos-Gabr. As an Edomite king of that name is mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions of the seventh century B.C., it was concluded that it was the same person. Pottery from the site, and similar pottery from other sites, was therefore dated as referring to that same time, and the conclusion was drawn that there was no nation of Edom at the time of David and Solomon. However, who can say that there was not an earlier king of Edom of that name? After all, there were two Jeroboams who ruled Israel, separated by over 150 years.

Years earlier, between 1932 and 1947, the American Jewish archaeologist and rabbi Nelson Glueck extensively explored the areas of ancient Edom, Moab and Ammon, now in Jordan. He discovered the ruins at Khirbat en-Nahas and dated them from pottery remains to the time of Solomon, concluding correctly that this was an important site for mining and refining copper. The recent excavators of the site have concluded that he was right and the site does go back to the time of David and Solomon. A large fortress on the site may date back as far as 1400 B.C., taking it back to about the time when the Israelites were opposed by the king of Edom on

their journey to the Promised Land (Num. 20:14-21). The joint authors even point to the reference in Genesis 36:31 to there being kings in Edom before there were any kings in Israel as needing to be looked at with fresh eyes, rather than rejected out of hand, as has been the tendency in the past.

**Source:** “Edom and copper: the emergence of ancient Israel’s rival”, Thomas E. Levy and Mohammed Najjar, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jul./Aug. 2006.

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### Bits and pieces from Jerusalem

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**E**XTENSIVE archaeological investigations have been made in and around Jerusalem since 1967, when Israel took over the Old City, and, though there is nothing new of great significance to report in this article, I have come across information in several publications on items of minor interest.

In 1998 archaeologists investigating a rock-cut tomb in the Hinnom Valley just south of the Old City of Jerusalem found textile fragments in a sealed niche. On examining these fragments, an expert in ancient textiles concluded that they were characteristic of the first century A.D., a conclusion confirmed by carbon-14 dating. It was also concluded that the fragments were the remains of burial shrouds, some made of wool, others of linen. The style is typical of Rome and Greece, not Palestine, indicating that they were imported. They would have

been expensive, another indication of the wealth of the upper classes at the time.

It was the custom then for Jews to be buried in a shroud rather than ordinary clothes. Thus we read, regarding the burial of Jesus, “And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down [from the cross], wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock” (Mk. 15:46, ESV). Examination of the remains of a body associated with the most complete of the shrouds showed that it was that of a man with leprosy, and it is surmised that he was laid to rest and the tomb sealed up, rather than the bones being removed later according to the usual custom, for fear of catching disease.

**Source:** “News from Jerusalem: Ancient burial shroud”, Daniel Herman, *Archaeological Diggings*, Jun./Jul. 2006.

**I**N recent years the Muslim authorities in Jerusalem have carried out extensive underground building work on the Temple Mount. In doing so they have ignored regulations requiring archaeological surveys to be done before such work is carried out. The government has not intervened for fear of provoking conflict. Soil from the Temple Mount has been dumped elsewhere, and Israeli archaeologists have sifted through it looking for items of interest. All manner of objects have been found: flint tools, jewellery, coins, and pieces of ancient glass and pottery.

One item of particular interest is a clay seal impression (a bulla, as it is called) bearing the name “Gedaliah the son of Immer”. The head of the salvage project, Professor Gabriel Barkay, notes that a priest called Pashur the son of Immer was “chief governor in the



**The Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount. Extensive underground building work has been carried out close by.**

(Picture: HolyLandPhotos.org)

house of the LORD” in Jeremiah’s day and was responsible for putting the prophet in the stocks (Jer. 20:1,2). The Immer family were one of the twenty-four courses of priests referred to in 1 Chronicles 24 (v. 14), and many members of this family returned from the exile in Babylon (Ezra 2:37). This seal appears to relate to a representative of this family involved in the service of the temple.

**Source:** News article, “Temple Mount soil yields rich finds”, *Jerusalem Report*, 13 Nov. 2006.

**W**HEN Jerusalem fell to the Romans in A.D. 70, the big event was, of course, the capture of the Temple Mount and the destruction by fire of the temple. It was in fact another month before the Romans succeeded in taking the area then known as the Upper City, corresponding to the present-day Jewish Quarter of the Old City and in those days the abode of the wealthy priestly class. The Upper City was separated from the Temple Mount by the Tyropoeon Valley, now largely filled in by the detritus of the centuries. Recent

excavations in this area, on the edge of the big plaza that now fronts the Western Wall (once referred to as the Wailing Wall), have revealed that in New Testament times there was a sheer cliff here. This helps to explain why it took the Romans so long to take this area, even after the city walls had been breached. The excavations are preparatory to the building of the Western Wall Heritage Centre, which looks like being an interesting addition to the sites already available to visitors to this fascinating city.

**Source:** News article, “Romans’ greatest obstacle found in capital”, *International Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 2006.

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## Palace of the kings of Judah

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**O**N a hilltop halfway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is Kibbutz Ramat Rahel, now swallowed up by the southward expansion of Israel’s capital. The name means ‘Rachel’s Height’, and comes from the fact that it is near to the traditional site of the tomb of Rachel on the main road between Jerusalem and



**The Western (Wailing) Wall with the Temple Mount in the background. The excavations in this area referred to on page 85 are taking place in the area to the left.**

(Picture: Tony Benson)

Bethlehem. (Scripture records that she died giving birth to Benjamin while journeying from Bethel to Bethlehem, but there is no particular reason to associate her death and burial with this site.)

I recall when staying at the kibbutz hotel coming across some excavated ruins adjacent to the hotel and on the hilltop overlooking the Bethlehem road, but there was nothing to explain them, although I was aware that they were thought to be the ruins of a palace of the kings of Judah. An article in *Biblical Archaeology Review* last autumn reviewed what has been discovered at this site and the controversy over the significance of the findings. This controversy makes it rather difficult to relate the site clearly to the Bible, but nevertheless the matter is worth discussing.

The main excavations of the site were conducted by Yohanan Aharoni during the period 1959 to 1962. He dated the palace to about 600 B.C. The king of Judah at that time was Jehoiakim, and Aharoni claimed that it was the “wide house” with “large chambers” and “ceiled [perhaps panelled] with cedar, and painted

with vermilion” built by Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:13,14). The archaeologist, general and politician Yigael Yadin disagreed, saying that it had marked similarities with the palace of the kings of Israel, discovered at Samaria. Because of this similarity he attributed its building to Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel and wife of Jehoram king of Judah. He suggested that the structure was “the house of Baal” mentioned in 2 Kings 11:18.

The author of the article, and more recent excavator of the site,

Gabriel Barkay, claims that both datings are wrong. He attributes the building of the palace to the time of Hezekiah or Manasseh. The remains of an earlier palace have been found on the site, and he proposes that this was built by Hezekiah and destroyed by the Assyrians under Sennacherib, with the newer palace being built either by Hezekiah or by his son Manasseh. He explains the similarity of style to the northern kingdom palace by saying that architects and builders from the north would have come to



**Elegantly carved capital from the palace at Ramat Rahel (believed to be a reproduction of the original).**

(Picture: HolyLandPhotos.org)

Jerusalem when the Assyrians brought the northern kingdom to an end. Whatever the truth of the matter, there is no doubt that it was a magnificent palace, with, for example, finely carved masonry and elegantly carved capitals and window balustrades. Traces of red paint were found on the latter, a reminder of the vermilion paint referred to in Jeremiah 22:14, even if this was not the same palace.

Attempts have been made to identify the site, which was a city as well as a palace, with both Beth-haccherem (Jer. 6:1) and Netopha (Neh. 12:28), but Barkay thinks these can be better identified with places in the area that bear names more closely linked with these names. He links it with an otherwise unidentified place called *Mmst*, a name found only on pottery jar handles.

About 2,000 such jar handles have been found in Judah, bearing the inscription *l'melkh*, meaning 'belonging to the king', and the name of one of four cities, Hebron, Socoh, Ziph and the mysterious *Mmst*. These jars were large storage jars, indicating that they contained provisions for the king and his household, and the four cities concerned are thought to have been administrative centres. As 164 of these jar handles were discovered at Ramat Rahel, Barkay suggests this was the site of *Mmst*. (The name is always given without vowels because no one knows how it should be pronounced.)

An intriguing find at the site was a sherd of pottery with a drawing of a king seated on his throne. It is suggested that this portrays Hezekiah as the builder of the palace. Finds from Ramat Rahel are displayed in the Israel Museum, and in Novem-

ber 2002 the excavations were opened as an archaeological park, with paths and explanatory plaques.

**Source:** "Royal palace, royal portrait? The tantalising possibilities of Ramat Rahel", Gabriel Barkay, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sept./Oct. 2006.

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## Letters from Jesus

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**A**LTHOUGH the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3 are presented as letters from Jesus Christ, our title refers to a new book by Michael Baigent entitled *The Jesus Papers*, which recounts the story of the supposed discovery of letters written by Jesus to the Sanhedrin denying that he was literally the Son of God. (Baigent is the co-author of the book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, which is the source of the idea, central to the theme of the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*, that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had children whose descendants are with us today.) It was brought out at the time of the copyright suit brought by the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* against Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, and was clearly designed to cash in on the interest created by the matter. The fact that the initial printing was 150,000 copies shows that it was expected to sell. The subtitle of the book indicates its sensationalist nature; it claims to reveal "the greatest cover up in history".

My only reason for mentioning this book is the widespread interest today in such matters. My information about it comes from a scathing review by Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, who is a Jew and therefore has no reason to defend the Divine sonship of

Jesus. Baigent claims to have seen two papyrus letters written in Aramaic by Jesus to the Sanhedrin denying any claim to be literally the Son of God, presumably to avoid condemnation for blasphemy. These letters were supposedly discovered in 1961 by a wealthy Jew digging in the basement of his home in Jerusalem, and are now stored in his house in a controlled environment. Shanks points out that no papyrus fragments have ever been discovered in Jerusalem, let alone complete documents as these are claimed to be, the reason being that the damp winter climate would long since have destroyed them. Baigent also claims that they have been dated to A.D. 34 (conveniently), but no reputable archaeologist would date something that precisely.

Baigent does not disclose the owner of the letters, nor where they were discovered, and as he does not know Aramaic has been unable to read them for himself. Two famous Israeli archaeologists, Yigael Yadin and Nahman Avigad, were allegedly shown them, but neither is alive to confirm this. Whether the story is made up by Baigent, or whether he has been the victim of an elaborate hoax, cannot be said, but it is hoped that no one will take this ridiculous story seriously.

As this magazine was being put together, news items were appearing about claims to have found the tomb of Jesus and his family, including his wife Mary Magdalene and their son. Although we, of course, give no credence to such claims, it is being much hyped, and I will return to it in a later issue.

**Source:** Review in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sept./Oct. 2006.