

# Out of the earth

News and views from the world of archaeology

Tony Benson

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## Ancient Israel in Georgia, USA

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**A**T LAGRANGE, Georgia, about an hour's drive from Atlanta, there can be found the Explorations in Antiquity Centre, opened in 2006 and designed to give visitors an idea of what ancient Israel was like. It was originally set up at En Kerem in the southwest suburbs of Jerusalem by archaeologist and teacher James Fleming, a long-time resident of Israel. Low numbers of visitors, the result of the troubles in Israel over the years, caused him to relocate it to the USA.

The main feature of the Centre is the Scripture Garden, where visitors walk along winding paths and view various displays illustrating life in Biblical times. It is divided into three sections:

### 1 The life of the shepherd.

Here visitors enter black goats' hair tents, made by the Bedouin of modern Israel in the age-old manner that goes back to patriarchal times, and seat themselves on camel-hair rugs on the floor, imagining what it would have been like to converse with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob 4,000 years ago. A well with watering troughs illustrates the all-important need for water for the flocks and herds, and enables visitors to cast their minds back to those familiar encounters by the well recorded in Genesis and Exodus: Abraham's

steward and Rebekah; Jacob and Rachel; Moses and the daughters of Jethro. The sheepfold where the flock spent the night under the care of the shepherd is another aspect of Biblical life reproduced, complete with a barrier of thorn bushes to deter wild beasts. This brings to mind the nightly vigils of Jacob and David, as well as the Master's parable of the sheepfold in John 10.

**2 The life of the farmer.** This illustrates Biblical agriculture in the form of a terraced hillside, with grapes and olives growing. The cultivation of grain in the hill country would have been carried out in the valley bottoms. At certain times the visitor can witness, or even participate in, the work of harvesting: treading out the grapes, pressing olives, threshing and grinding corn.

**3 The life of the village.** Here can be found a city gate, inside which the elders would discuss the affairs of the village, a scene referred to in several places in the Bible, notably the book of Ruth. There is a reconstruction of the typical four-roomed house of Old Testament times; the remains of such have been excavated at many a dig. On the roof, flax, grain and fruit are being dried out and a lattice of vines provides welcome shade from the hot sun of summer, a reminder of the Kingdom, when "they shall sit every man under his

vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid" (Mic. 4:4), presumably relaxing after a hard day's work or resting during the hottest time of the day.

Within the Scripture Garden is a small complex of typical tombs, including one from the time of Jesus, with niches in the walls where bodies would be placed, and even a 'body' wrapped in linen. The tomb where Jesus was laid was, of course, a new tomb, and he was therefore the first, and possibly only, occupant. Trees and shrubs mentioned in the Bible have been planted throughout the garden, with considerable efforts having been made to obtain specimens.

A feature of the Centre is the various activities arranged for children, who can try their hand at baking bread the Bedouin way, as it would have been done in Abraham's time, or piecing together sherds (broken bits of ancient pots), or excavating trenches salted with 'finds' to be discovered. A Biblical meal can be arranged for the end of this trip, modelled on the practices in New Testament times, although guests are allowed to sit upright rather than reclining. To preserve authenticity there are no knives and forks; food is eaten with the hands.

A 166-page book entitled *The Explorations in Antiquity Centre* has been produced, profusely illustrated with 414 colour photographs. It is available from [biblicalresources@earthlink.net](mailto:biblicalresources@earthlink.net). Readers outside the USA may be able to get it from Amazon.

This place sounds fascinating and I would be interested to hear from any of our American readers who have visited it.

**Source:** "Exploring the Holy Land close to home", no author's name given, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov./Dec. 2008.

## Gold-plated stones

**W** RITING about the inner courts of the temple, into which no Gentile could go on pain of death, the Jewish historian Josephus says there were a number of entrance gates, nine of which were "covered over with gold and silver, as were the jambs of their doors and their lintels" (*Wars of the Jews*, Book 5, chapter 5.3, Whiston edition). The magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* reports on the emergence of evidence for the truth of this statement. Apparently some stones with traces of gold attached were discovered in excavations at the south of the Temple Mount conducted following the capture of the Old City of Jerusalem in June 1967. For some reason nothing has been said about this discovery, and the editor of the magazine was unaware of it until reference was made to it in the ongoing forgery trial in Jerusalem of a man accused of forging, amongst other things, a tablet describing the building repairs instigated by King Joash, as detailed in 2 Kings 12.

Those who support the authenticity of the tablet cite the fact that there are tiny globules of gold in the patina of the inscription, which, it is said, resulted from the melting and splashing of gold in one of the two great conflagrations that occurred, at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and of the Romans in A.D. 70. The gold-plated stones were brought before the court

as evidence that there were indeed substantial amounts of gold existing in the temple buildings. News of this discovery helps us to envisage what the disciple who said, "Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!" (Mk. 13:1), was referring to.

**Source:** "Gold-plated building stone found near Temple Mount", news item in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jan./Feb. 2009.

## A city from David's time

**T** HE valley of Elah is well known as the scene of David's killing of the Philistine giant Goliath. This valley runs east from the coastal plain towards Jerusalem, and in the reign of Saul the Philistines occupied this coastal plain, one of the five Philistine cities, Gath, being situated about six miles from the valley. It was from this city that Goliath came.

On the northern side of the valley there exists on the hilltop what is evidently the remains of an ancient city, called in Arabic Khirbet Qeiyafa. In the summer

of 2008 excavations began at this site. Pottery fragments were found and dated to a particular time in the history of ancient Israel, about 1,000 B.C., the time of David. These fragments were of pottery in the Israelite style, not the Philistine style. Unlike many sites excavated in Israel, there were no successive strata of remains extending over centuries of building and rebuilding. Carbon-14 dating was carried out on olive pits (stones) found at the site and the results were consistent with this date. This hilltop town was surrounded by massive double walls, 2,200 feet long and thirteen feet wide. It is estimated that over 200,000 tons of stones were used in its construction.

Two questions arise: Can this site be identified with any place named in the Bible? and, Who built this city? The excavator, Yossi Garfinkel, suggests it is Shaaraim, referred to in 1 Samuel 17:52, which details what happened after David killed the Philistine champion: "And the men of Israel and of Judah arose, and shouted, and pursued the Philistines, until thou come



**The Valley of Elah, looking towards the hills on the north side of the valley.**

Photographs on these pages: Tony Benson

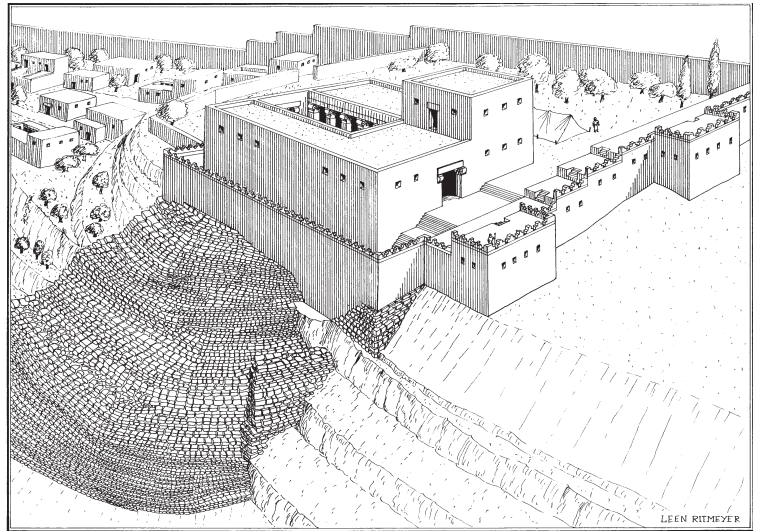
to the valley, and to the gates of Ekron. And the wounded of the Philistines fell down by the way to Shaaraim, even unto Gath, and unto Ekron". As for who built the city, Garfinkel has no suggestion to make. We do know from 2 Samuel 5:17-25 and 21:15-22 that in the early part of David's reign the Philistines invaded Israel on several occasions. Given that the valley of Elah is one of the main routes to Jerusalem from the coastal plain, it may well be that David built this fortified city as part of his defences against the Philistines. The city was destroyed later, but it is impossible to say when; the first occasion when Israel was subject to foreign invasion after the time of David was when Pharaoh Shishak invaded in the time of Rehoboam.

The most interesting discovery at the site, however, does not look very much but has exciting implications. It is a piece of broken pottery with writing on it (potsherds were generally used for writing on in those times, unless a more permanent record was required). The writing is Hebrew, and is the earliest piece of Hebrew script found in ancient Israel. It is being studied by Hag-gai Misgav, an epigrapher (an expert in ancient scripts) at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and its contents will be made known in due course.

**Source:** "Newly discovered: a fortified city from King David's time", Hershel Shanks, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jan./Feb. 2009.

## Nehemiah's wall

**B**RIEF reference was made in March 2008 to the apparent discovery of a section of the wall of Jerusalem built by Nehemiah (p. 25). A fuller report of this discovery has now been made by Eilat Mazar, the excavator.



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**Reconstruction drawing and photograph of the Stepped Stone Structure.**

The location of this discovery is the City of David, the ridge running south of the Temple Mount where the earliest remains of ancient Jerusalem have been discovered.

Various remains from various times have been discovered on the ridge and on the slopes running down to the Kidron valley to the east. Excavations in this area are sponsored by the City of David Foundation and the Shalem Centre Jerusalem, and these organisations, and Mazar

herself, seek to relate the findings to the Old Testament record, a contrast to many archaeologists today who seem to avoid suggesting that their discoveries support the Bible.

The piece of wall attributed to Nehemiah is located on top of two earlier structures known respectively as the Stepped Stone Structure and the Large Stone Structure. The former runs down the slope and was built to provide a firm foundation for the Large Stone Structure,

a building identified as being David's palace. The more recent excavations reveal the remains of two towers and of a section of wall. It is this wall and towers that are attributed to Nehemiah.

The Bible records that the building of the wall took place in only fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15), a tribute to the remarkable organizational skills of the energetic Nehemiah. It should, however, be remembered that the wall was

not built from scratch, it was the rebuilding of the walls broken down in the Babylon invasion. Thus when Nehemiah arrived at Jerusalem and carried out a nighttime tour of inspection, he "viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down" (2:13).

The recently discovered wall, however, was an entirely new wall, built higher up the slope than the old wall, near the crest

of the slope. The workmanship of the wall is in fact rather poor; the stones have not been given a smooth finished face, and gaps between the stones have been hastily filled with stone chips and mortar. This fits the fact that Nehemiah's wall was completed in a hurry. Pottery finds support a dating to the time of Nehemiah.

**Source:** "The wall that Nehemiah built", Eilat Mazar, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Mar./Apr. 2009.