

The stones cry out

Trends and discoveries in Bible archaeology

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Many archaeological discoveries can help to establish the historical reliability of the Bible. The most valuable finds, however, are written inscriptions, which relate to people or places mentioned in the Scriptures or even quote the inspired text. When these appear on the antiquities market, there can always be the suspicion that they are forgeries, but when found in situ in the context of officially approved excavations they provide reliable evidence. Each of the discoveries described in this article falls into that category.

Inscription from the time of David

THE DISCOVERY of the remains of a fortified city from the time of King David has previously been reported in the *Testimony*.¹ Located in the Valley of Elah, where David fought Goliath, the site today is known as Khirbet Qeiyafa and has tentatively been identified as Old Testament Shaaraim, referred to in 1 Samuel 17:52 as involved in the subsequent battle against the Philistines. It seems to have been a frontier fortification, built in the time of David, around 1000 B.C., but subsequently destroyed, perhaps by Pharaoh Shishak (2 Chron. 12:2-4), and never rebuilt.

One of the most interesting finds in the excavations at the site was of an ostrakon, a piece of broken pottery with an ink inscription. The inscribed potsherd was found on the north side of the four-chamber gate of the city. It has five lines of text and

has been subjected to detailed photographic enhancement in order to clarify the faded text. The inscription has now been published and has emerged as the earliest known example of Hebrew writing. According to the translator, Professor Gershon Galil of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Haifa, it is similar in content to such scriptures as Exodus 23:2, Psalm 72:4 and Isaiah 1:17, advocating care for widows and orphans and encouraging the king to maintain justice. Although not copying any one text, it shows that such Bible passages were in existence hundreds of years before modern critics claim that the Bible was composed.

The inscription was clearly written by a scribe, and Professor Galil therefore concludes: "It can now be maintained that it was highly reasonable that during the 10th century B.C., during the reign of King David, there were scribes in Israel who were able to write literary texts and complex historiographies

such as the books of Judges and Samuel". The impressive fortifications at the site, together with the finding of an advanced literary composition, serve to refute those 'minimalist' scholars who claim that there was no kingdom of Israel in existence at that time.

Source: Bryant G. Wood, "Ancient Hebrew inscription dated to time of David", *Associates for Biblical Research Newsletter*, Jan. 2010 (available from abr@biblearchaeology.org).

Oldest written document

ISRAELI archaeologists from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, carrying out excavations outside Jerusalem's Old City walls, have found a tiny clay fragment dating from the fourteenth century B.C. that contains the oldest written document ever found in Jerusalem. The find is believed to be part of a tablet from a royal archive, and testifies to the importance of Jerusalem as a major city in the Canaanite period, long before its conquest by King David in the tenth century B.C. The excavations in the Ophel, located between the southern wall of the Old City of Jerusalem and the City of David to its south, have been conducted by Dr. Eilat Mazar, who is also responsible for having

1. T. Benson, "Out of the earth: A city from David's time", May 2009, p. 104.



The excavation area at Ophel, just outside the south wall of the Temple Mount, where a clay fragment containing cuneiform symbols has recently been found.

discovered what may be the remains of King David's palace.

The clay fragment measures 2 × 2.8 centimetres and one centimetre thick. It appears to have been part of a tablet, and contains cuneiform symbols in ancient Akkadian, the common language of the time, clearly written by a skilled scribe. It is thought to be contemporary with the Amarna letters found in Egypt, recording correspondence between the rulers of Canaanite city-states and the Egyptian Pharaoh, among which are six tablets sent from Abdi-Heba, the Canaanite king of Jerusalem. The newly discovered fragment could be part of a similar message intended to be sent to Egypt, or a copy for the royal archive. Chemical analysis has confirmed that the fragment was made of materials from the Jerusalem area.

This new discovery, providing solid evidence of the importance of Jerusalem during the second half of the second millennium B.C., answers critics who have

used the previous lack of substantial archeological findings to argue that Jerusalem was not a major centre at that time. It lends weight to the importance of the city in subsequent times, leading up to its conquest by King David, as described in the Bible.

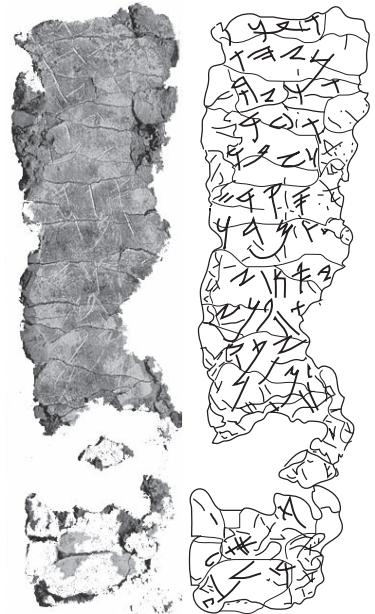
Source: "Oldest written document ever found in Jerusalem discovered by Hebrew University researchers", Hebrew University of Jerusalem Press Release, 12 Jul. 2010.

The high priestly blessing

DURING excavations in Jerusalem in 1979–80 by Gabriel Barkay on an escarpment known as Ketef Hinnom, overlooking the Hinnom Valley, a group of seven burial caves was found. Just one of the tombs was undisturbed and had escaped the attention of grave robbers. A repository in the tomb contained the bones of ninety or so individuals who had been buried there, and a fascinating collection of burial

gifts and offerings. Many items of fashion and jewellery were revealed, reminiscent of those listed by Isaiah in his scathing condemnation of the wealthy women of Jerusalem (3:18-23).

The most exciting items, however, were two inscribed amulets, small, rolled-up pieces of silver foil, dating from the late seventh century B.C. Israel Museum conservators had to develop special techniques in order to unroll them. The Hebrew inscriptions on each amulet were found to include slight variations of the three blessings which form the words of the high priest's blessing recorded in Numbers 6:23-26. One amulet also includes a version of Deuteronomy 7:9, referring to God as "the steadfast God, Who keeps covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments". The tiny letters were faintly scratched onto the silver surface, recalling the method described in



Silver amulet containing the high-priestly blessing of Numbers 6:23-26.

Jeremiah 17:1: “. . . with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond”.

These texts are by far the oldest words in existence quoting Bible verses, and contain the oldest usage of the Memorial Name of God. Needless to say, the dating of these inscriptions was at first challenged by critics who maintain that very little of the Bible is historically trustworthy. They claimed that the amulets had been written in the Hellenistic period, between the Old and New Testaments, rather than being genuine products of

the Old Testament era, even though they were discovered in the lowest and oldest layers of the artefacts in the tomb.

However, in 1994 new high-resolution digital photographs, taken using fibre-optic lighting techniques and computer imaging, revealed traces of letters that were not previously identified, as well as clarifying letters that were previously much harder to read and identify. The shape and form of the letters, together with the location of the amulets in the lowest layers of the tomb, confirms their dating to the late seventh

century B.C., the time of Josiah and Jeremiah, *before* the Babylonian exile. These amulets thus once again confirm the antiquity of God’s Word and the accuracy of the faithful scribes who copied it over so many centuries.

Source: Gabriel Barkay, “The Riches of Ketef Hinnom”, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Jul.-Oct. 2009, pp. 22ff.; Stephen Caesar, “The Blessing of the Silver Scrolls”, *Associates for Biblical Research Newsletter*, Jan. 2010. See also “Metals in the Bible (3) Silver”, P. Hemingray, *Testimony*, Sept. 2004, p. 370, www.testimony-magazine.org/back/sep2004/hemingray.pdf.