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CAYETANA H. JOHNSON
San Damaso University, Madrid
<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8623-9108>

WHY ARCHAEOLOGY IS IMPORTANT FOR THEOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION

More than four thousand years ago, the region around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers down to the Persian Gulf and border the Arabian Desert was an area of great civilizational wealth. Historically it was named the Fertile Crescent and it was destined to be a center of culture and civilization from Prehistory to the Greco-Roman era, from a historiographical point of view; its prestige and the legacy still remains and prevails until today, as a source of permanent admiration.

Around 2000 BC, the eastern Mediterranean experienced one of most splendid moments of antiquity with civilizations such as the Minoan, whose kings created the first known thalassocracy in history. The Mycenaean Greeks inherited this legacy and built fortress-like cities to defend their new settlements as organized people with political and religious institutions. Meanwhile, in Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Egypt, great kings belonging to historical dynasties were architects of culture who enriched the various peoples that came into contact with this area. During the Bronze Age, Egypt was the mightiest power in the region¹, especially from the 12th Dynasty, with Pharaoh Amenemhet I. His power and sphere of influence extended from Nubia, through the Sinai Peninsula and as far north as Canaan and Syria; on the Mediterranean coast the Egyptians built military garrisons to control the all-important Via Maris (in Roman records, referred to as Hattin by the Egyptians) that led to Anatolia and the Upper Mesopotamia area. In Anatolia, the powerful kingdom of the Hittites was a great actor on the political-social scene of this time, with special diplomatic and commercial relations between the Hittite kings and the local populations and the Sumerian and Akkadian kingdoms on the eastern side, with the Egyptians to the south.

¹ M. Magnusson, *BC. The Archaeology of the Lands of the Bible*, London: The Bodley Head 1977, p. 43–44.

The power of both Egypt and Mesopotamia was projected in the expansive monumental architecture of pyramids and temples, around which an urban life developed thanks to an agrarian and commercial economy. The introduction of irrigation systems to conduct the generous waters of the great rivers (Nile, Tigris and Euphrates) led to the establishment of farms and plantations of corn, fruit trees and legumes. With the agricultural exploitation, paths were opened to various commercial activities due to the increasing number of products available for trade, many of which were luxury products such as rich textiles, precious stones and gold from the Egyptian mines. Exports and imports were intense, not only by land but routes were also open by sea from the Persian Gulf towards India or through the Mediterranean, and new sea routes opened towards Anatolia, Cyprus or Crete, reaching as far as the Black Sea².

This rich world of contacts and exchange was even further improved with the appearance of the cuneiform script, widely known in diplomatic and commercial correspondence³. From the clay tablets excavated so far we know that copper was extracted from the Sinai mines and silver from the Taurus mountains of Asia Minor; gold and ivory were traded from Somalia and Nubia, the purple from the Phoenician cities of Canaan, incense and spices from the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and the beautiful ceramic vessels from the island of Crete.

The material benefits were accompanied by moments of philosophical and poetic reflection as a natural consequence, and so literature and learning flourished. In Egypt the first novels and secular poetry appeared, and likewise in Mesopotamia⁴ to such an extent that it was interpreted as an experience similar to the Renaissance in Europe. Linguistic professions arose, like in Akkad, from where we have a large grammar and bilingual dictionary of Akkadian, which had become a lingua franca – a common language in the world at that time, both for diplomacy as for creative expression. The composition of the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Babylonian Poems of Creation, *Enuma Elish*, are the dramatic reflection of a spirituality and a mentality linked to regional powers where minor kingdoms under the tutelage of a powerful king, like the great Hammurabi, for example, had the last word in the socio-political arena⁵. In Egypt, their doctors composed medicinal texts based on the empirical knowledge of herbs and various surgical practices that demonstrated an impressive awareness of anatomy and how the organs of the human body function. In the field of mathematics, both the Egyptians and the Babylonians had already reached conclusions that the Pythagoreans would later confirm. The astrological observation

² D.B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 1995, p. 33–35.

³ M. Magnusson, *BC. The Archaeology of the Lands of the Bible*, p. 37–38.

⁴ A.L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia. Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 237.

⁵ A.L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 251–267.

of Mesopotamia served to strengthen astronomical science because the movement of the planets was studied to calculate and predict the fate of kings and peoples⁶.

2. ARCHAEOLOGY AS A PROVIDER OF THE CULTURAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

In the atmosphere of prosperity that prevailed in the region, around 1960 BC various nomadic tribes made their historic appearance in the Near East. They brought about the collapse of the kingdoms of Sumer and Akkad and new dynasties arose. In the midst of this great upheaval, one of these tribes, the Semitic was destined to be the cause of one of the greatest events in history, from the point of view of the History of Religions. Thanks to the family of Abraham, the first of the patriarchs, the Hebrew people made their ancestral appearance.

2.1. EGYPT

In the biblical book of Genesis 12, the narrative that begins the patriarchal cycle recounts Abram's need to go down to Egypt due to the famine that was being experienced in Canaan, the place that the God of Israel had allotted him as the Promised Land.

Egypt was the great commercial power of the time and due to its wealth⁷, neighboring peoples also ended up imitating its aesthetics in clothing, makeup, jewelry and iconography; likewise some deities fused symbolic elements with others from the Semitic religions. Thanks to the aridity of the land of the pharaohs, a great variety of hieroglyphs and figurative representations have been preserved that are a good example of the power of the kings of the country of the Nile. Within this written or graphic material, there is evidence of continuous migrations of Semites who sought to make their fortune in Egyptian lands. In this context are the stories of the biblical patriarchs Abram (later reconverted into Abraham upon reaching Canaan), Isaac and Jacob, each of them tribal chiefs with an important offspring and goods to trade.

The two main cities of the pharaohs at that time were Memphis and Thebes. Between these two cities, about 250 kilometers south of present-day Cairo, the remains of the ancient settlement of Beni Hassan are located near the Nile River;

⁶ A.L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 289–310.

⁷ For the sources of the history of Egypt: D.B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*, p. 140–143.

in 1890, the Egyptian authorities commissioned British researcher Percy A. Newberry to explore their necropolis with funding from the Egyptian Exploration Fund⁸. The tombs were built to bury high officials from the Middle Kingdom period in the period from 2055 to 1650 BC. The local leaders preferred to be buried near their governing centers instead of Saqara, the traditional place due to its proximity to the pharaohs.

Among the remains exposed by archeology are a quarry and a large temple. However, the truly outstanding feature are the tombs, decorated with a good number of details of great narrative-historical value since they show a world of high material culture level. From what may be discerned in the murals, it is believed that the leaders of Beni Hassan had a competent high power, something that had been happening equally with other provincial governors, a fact that could only occur when the pharaoh was weakened in his ability to have the control over the country.

The Beni Hassan necropolis has thirty-nine monumental tombs. Among them, Khnum-Hotep III stands out named numerically because other Khnum-Hoteps have been found in the area). He was governor of the *nomos*, or province called Gazelle, during the 12th Dynasty. His tomb was carved out of bedrock as was customary and consists of a front patio, a porticoed access with two columns, a main chamber, also colonnaded inside, and a small ritual room that served as a sanctuary. The inner rooms were extensively decorated with inscriptions and frescoes showing the daily life and administration of Khnum-Hotep himself. These paintings were published in 1845 thanks to the cataloging work of Jean François Champollion (who is responsible for the translation of the Rosetta Stone) who stayed in Beni Hassan between 1828–29. With the arrival of the British a few years later, systematic and intensive excavations ended up exposing the rest of the necropolis.

The frescoes have a varied range of themes: paying taxes, fishing on the Nile, laborers working the vineyards, the flora and fauna of the area and sporting events, which the governor himself and his wife enjoyed at leisure. Of special interest for Bible study is what has conventionally been called the “Asian scene” in the mural representation of the tomb of Khnum-Hotep III. Located on the northern wall, it is dated to the sixth year of the reign of Pharaoh Sesostri II (ca. 1892 BC). To the left of him, the governor Khnum-Hotep is represented in a larger size according to the Egyptian iconographic convention and in the attitude of a hunter, another image of the time that alludes to power and strength. To the right, the caravan of Syro-Palestinian Semites approaching the governor is seen in a row. In the inscriptions of the same place they are called *aamu* and, according to Egyptologists, it referred to the people who regularly crossed the Sinai from Canaan to enter Egypt⁹;

⁸ P.E. Newberry, *Beni Hasan*, part I–IV, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Tubner & Co. Ltd. 1893–1900.

⁹ J. Kamrin, *The Aamu of Shu in the Tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan*, “Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections” 1 (2009), p. 22–36.

contemporary archaeologists use the expression “Syro-Palestinian” to define the ancient inhabitants of Canaan based on geographical criteria after work carried out in Lebanon and Ugarit (Syria). These Canaanites usually settled further to the north of Egypt; therefore, the fact that they appear in these frescoes so far south is due to the fact that the old governor thought it was a relevant sign of power and status.

The “Asian scene” shows fifteen people – eight men, four women and three children – all of them with a different skin color from the rest of the characters represented in the mural. This was how the Egyptians distinguished the foreign peoples of the Mediterranean area. The inscription above the man carrying a gazelle tells that the group was thirty-seven people in total and that they were carrying *stibium*, a highly valued black cosmetic that the Egyptians used to paint their eyes. *Stibium* is the Roman name taken from the Greek *stimmi*, which in turn is a loan from the Egyptian *sdemet*, the word that appears in the record on this mural from Beni Hassan; the modern term for this cosmetic product is the Arabic *khol* which comes from the Akkadian *gukhlu*. The conclusion of the rest of the record that an official presents to Khnum-Hotep ends with the following line: “The arrival, with the paint of eyes, that the thirty-seven Aamu brought him (to the governor)”. The appearance of the entourage clearly shows their non-Egyptian origin; their faces have finer features and the men feature abundant natural hair and beards. Their clothes have different colors that distinguish them from the white linen of the Egyptians and they are bare-shouldered. The tunics reach to their ankles and some feature fringed hems. A particular detail is that the Semites wear sandals while the Egyptians walk barefoot in accordance with the protocol of high positions and officials in the service of the Pharaoh of Egypt.

Under the neck of an antelope there is another inscription that indicates the name of the man who carries the animal. He is the head of the group and his name is Ibsha, a name that has its equivalent in the biblical text in the form of Abishai. It is a clearly Semitic name and appears in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel 26,6, where King David addresses “Abishai the son of Zeruah”. This Abishai was the brother of Joab, David’s commander when the monarchical institution of Israel had been formalized around 1000 BC. Beni Hassan’s Ibsha has the appearance of not only being the leader of a caravan but also the head of an extended family used to traveling for business purposes. By the way he leans to greet the official, he is well-acquainted with Egyptian customs and social customs; in one hand he holds an animal and his shepherd’s crook, which at the same time is a sign of leadership. The two officials presenting Ibsha are equally identified with their corresponding inscriptions: Nefer-Hotep is the Scribe of the Royal Documents and Khety is the Watcher of the Hunters. Nefer-Hotep holds a papyrus that records the reason for the arrival of the caravan of these Canaanites, an attitude that reveals the importance of the event from the point of view of the governor Khnum-Hotep who wanted to represent it in his tomb.

Because this wall composition was made around the 19th century BC, it may well offer an image of what the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob used to do each time they went down to Egypt, as may be read in the biblical texts of Genesis. In the lands of the Nile they spent long periods, especially in times of famine, a frequent occurrence in Canaan. The historical dating of the biblical patriarchal cycle coincides with what is represented in Beni Hassan and lasts for a few more centuries. Joseph – one of the sons of the patriarch Jacob – came and occupied a high position in the court of the pharaoh of his time and, in a wonderful coincidence, Genesis 37,3 states that his father Jacob gives him a colored tunic as a token of his affection that his jealous brothers tore before he was sold to the Midianites who were traveling to Egypt, an episode that marks the beginning of Joseph’s fortune. This colorful robe recalls the clothing of the Canaanites of Beni Hassan and, although it is not possible to speak of Israelites yet, it does offer us a fair context to support the narrative of the biblical characters.

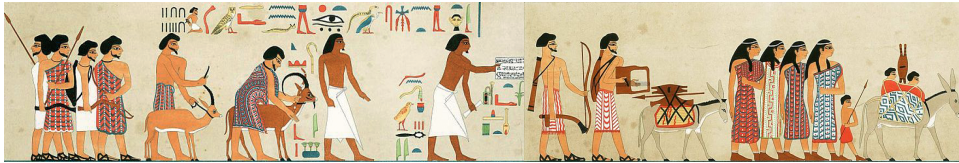


Fig. 1 “The Asiatic Scene” from the Beni Hassan Tomb

2.2. MESOPOTAMIA

In Genesis 11,31 the family of the patriarch Abraham settled in Harran after leaving the city of Ur with his father Terah, his nephew Lot and Sarah, the patriarch’s wife, plus the cattle and material goods typical of a caravan of Bedouins. Harran was an important city located in Upper Mesopotamia surrounded by great cities like Aleppo, Nineveh or Damascus; it was a crossroads to the east to go to India or to the west to enter Anatolia.

It is in Harran that Abraham receives the call of God urging him to leave “the land of your parents’ birth” (Genesis 12,5) to go to Canaan, the Promised Land of the biblical text. Later the third patriarch Jacob fled from his brother Esau to Harran after the theft of the birthright and it is here that he marries two wives and has numerous children who form the Twelve Tribes of Israel after working for twenty years for his uncle and father-in-law Laban. Harran has a long existence that can be dated to the 3rd Millennium BC. It is considered one of the main cities of the Bronze Age and so was excavated in the 1950s by the archaeologist Storm

Rice¹⁰ with the support of the University of London. Since 1983 there have been renewed excavations under Turkish direction. This city was part of a larger network of others especially focused on commerce. The caravan nuclei were developing communication routes that over time were reused for other purposes, such as the mobilization of troops to appease the rebel regions of the local power of the specific historical moment.

In the oldest phase of existence, Harrán (like other neighboring cities) was organized and managed by small groups of a tribal type. These tribes were identified with characteristic names preceded by the word *beit*, meaning “house”. In this sense, it is understood that the family of the patriarch Abraham was identified with this formula and was known as Bet Abraham in the biblical text when he begins his journey to Canaan as God commands¹¹.

The city where Abraham and his family settled followed an urban model characteristic of the entire region. The near-eastern landscape was recognized by numerous artificial hills called *tell*. The planning of these tells consisted of an upper part or acropolis, where the most important institutions were located (temples, royal and administrative palaces) and they were accessed through specific entrances where port taxes had to be paid and the King himself could sit on a podium to receive illustrious personalities. In the lower part of the tell, the common people with their trade specializations used to settle and gave names to the neighborhoods of the various artisan professions: blacksmiths, silversmiths, tanners, etc. Normally these cities used to be surrounded by one or two walls, depending on their expansion due to population growth. As the importance of these cities grew, they were surrounded by fortifications and the roads were constantly guarded; attacks by gangs of mercenaries, or Bedouins who had become impoverished, were common.

With the growth and development of their cities thanks to economic wealth, the old caravan populations settled in these key points along their commercial routes. Some families of ancient tribes began to see themselves as citizens and not as simple nomads¹², the haima or Bedouin tent began to transform into an adobe or stone house if the family’s financial situation permitted. From what can be read in documents written in cuneiform, it is possible to trace how the governance of these ancient cities was centralized under the figure of the king and an administrative apparatus that organized and managed the treasury, diplomatic agreements

¹⁰ For the reports of his excavations with images: *Papers of Professor David Storm Rice relating to the Harran Excavation – Archives Hub (jisc.ac.uk)*, <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb102-ms380755> [access: 1 IV 2021].

¹¹ A. Lemaire, *Cycle primitif d’Abraham et contexte géographico-historique*, in: A. Lemaire, B. Otzen (eds.), *History and Traditions in Early Israel. Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen*, Leiden: Brill 1993, p. 62–67.

¹² The same feature is seen among the Israelites in Canaan: N.P. Lemche, *City-Dwellers or Administrators. Further Light on the Canaanites*, in: A. Lemaire, B. Otzen (eds.), *History and Traditions in Early Israel. Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen*, Leiden: Brill 1993, p. 86–87.

and religion; some of these cities even had a series of privileges with respect to the king, on whom they depended, that affected the levy of taxes, something that allowed them a certain local autonomy. In return, they cooperated in defense when required. The best known cities of this type were Nippur, Babylon, and Sippar; in Upper Mesopotamia we have Assur and the Harran of the patriarch Abraham. These cities were considered “free cities” and in general were exempt from corvées (forced labour), military service and certain taxes, although this also varied along with the political situation at the time. Even in the administrative documents of Ur III it can be read that some people of semi-free status were not obliged to work the land¹³ and that during a year in the reign of Isme-Dagan of Isin, the inhabitants of Nippur were granted non-payment of taxes in gold and silver as well as the military levy¹⁴. This helps us to understand the refusal of the Israelites to have a centralized government under the figure of a king as can be read in 1 Samuel 8: the resistance to the monarchical institution already came from long ago in other parts of the region, not only in Canaan¹⁵.

In this context of ancient urbanism, for a long time archaeologists have attempted to unearth the mythical city of Mari, mentioned in several inscriptions of its time: one of them maintains that Mari was the tenth city founded after the Great Flood. For this reason, the Mari excavations were one of the most spectacular events in the history of the area since, among other information, it was possible to relate the patriarchal extra-biblical contexts of some Old Testament stories that were familiar in connection with the Mari culture¹⁶.

The last king to live in this majestic palace was Zimri-Lim when the city of Mari fell into the hands of another legendary king, Hammurabi of Babylon, around 1700 BC. Despite the usual destruction with an immense fire according to the war behaviors of the time, the quality of the palace walls made it possible to preserve not only the archives but also the rest of the facilities, such as the kitchen or the bathrooms, something that in archeology is very valuable in order to understand the daily life of those who preceded us, and not only the heroic deeds of the rulers.

The final greatness of Mari coincides in time with the biblical experience of the patriarch Abraham and his family. Mari was inhabited by the Amorites, whose existence began in 2500 BC according to the Sumerian texts, where they are identified as *mar.tu*. They were a group of nomads distributed between Syria and

¹³ Cf. M. Widell, *Ur III Economy and Bureaucracy: The Neo-Sumerian Cuneiform Tablets in the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College (I)*, “Orient” 55 (2020), p. 117–154; p. 131–132: on the *bala* system, the rotational work obligation to the crown: <https://doi.org/10.5356/orient.55.117> [access: 1 IV 2021].

¹⁴ M. Van De Mierop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004, p. 139.

¹⁵ D.B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*, p. 275–280.

¹⁶ J.L. Montero Fenollós, *De Uruk a Mari. Innovaciones tecnológicas de la Primera Revolución Urbana en el Medio Éufrates meridional*, “Anejos de Nailós” (2014), no. 1, p. 139–155.

Canaan. Probably due to famine, they moved and settled in Mari around 2200 BC. They were not bellicose people but preferred peace in order to protect trade and the economy. They were strongly focused on worship and religious ceremony; therefore, in the few representations that we have of them in Mari, their appearance conveys serenity.

The Amorites spoke a dialect variation of Akkadian that was combined with constructions and vocabulary typical of the northwestern Semitic languages; some specialists have also related it to the languages of the Canaan family. Perhaps this explains why the patriarchal promise made by the God of Israel towards Abraham is inscribed in an Amorite-Canaanite context if we take into account that there are other elements in common, as pointed out by Professor Giorgio Buccellati in his works on the Amorites and, especially, the Hurrians – another neighboring people that lived in the city of Urkesh, which was conquered by the king of Mari absorbing the Hurrian population¹⁷. The recent excavations of Urkesh directed by Buccellati himself confirms this assimilation that lasted some time and help to better contextualize the biblical patriarchal cycle, with the arrival of Abraham to the Promised Land.

3. THE EXAMPLE OF THE CITY OF JERUSALEM

3.1. BUILDING THE HOLIEST BUILDING, THE HOUSE OF YHWH

According to 2 Samuel 7,2 ss, David wanted to build a temple for Yahweh, but he is not allowed to do so, although, according to the Chronicler (1 Chronicles 22,14 ss), King David prepared everything for its construction with a large quantity of material, which was later given to his son Solomon. David also buys from Araunah the Jebusite (2 Samuel 24,21) the ground for the threshold on which he offers a sacrifice. It is here that Solomon later builds the solid building, his Temple (2 Chronicles 3,1).

In terms of planning and projecting the building, Solomon relies on Hiram, the King of Tire, who provides him with skilled workers and allows him to cut wood in Lebanon – majestic cedar trees. Solomon begins to build the Temple in the fourth year of his reign and the construction lasts seven years: “In the fourth year, in the month of Ziv, the foundations of the House of Yahweh were laid, and in the eleventh year, in the month of Bul – which is the eighth month – the House was finished in all its parts, according to his entire project. Solomon raised it in seven years” (1 Kings 6,37–38). The structure was 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and

¹⁷ G. Buccellati, *The Amorites of the Ur III period*, Naples: Istituto Orientale 1966, p. 8–12.

30 cubits high (1 Kings 6,2). Its door opened to the east; 2 Chronicles 3,4 adds that the portico was 120 cubits high, which would make it a regular tower. The ashlars used were hewn in the quarry, so that no work of this type was necessary within the precincts of the Temple (1 Kings 6,7). The roof was cedar and the whole house, according to the Hebrew term *bayit*, was covered with gold.

The temple was not alone as it was part of a splendid set of buildings that Solomon built in the immediate vicinity of the sanctuary. These buildings included the residence of Solomon, the palace of the Pharaoh's daughter, the throne room, the "portico of pillars" and "the house of the forest of Lebanon" (1 Kings 7,1–8). These were arranged in such a way that when entering the palace grounds, the first thing one saw was the "house of the forest of Lebanon", with its splendid pillars, and then the interior "portico of pillars", the state room or hall of the throne, the seat of Solomon. Then one encountered the entrance to the private home, and, finally, the palace of the Pharaoh's daughter. For the splendor of these buildings, Solomon became indebted to the Phoenician architects and workers (1 Kings 7,40–47).

The chambers that surrounded the Holy Place of Solomon's Temple were possibly storehouses for treasure: "Likewise the plan of all the things that I had in mind for the courts of the house of God, for all the surrounding chambers, for the treasuries of the house of God, and for the treasuries of sanctified things" (1 Chronicles 28,12). These structures have parallels in the temples of Babylon and Egypt in that they have similar chambers, which surrounded the naos, or hypostyle hall, and were used for similar purposes. The "Sea of Bronze" finds its parallel in the Babylonian temples with a large container of water called an *apsu* (watery depth). As the Babylonian ziggurat typified a mountain, the *apsu* symbolized the sea. Their temple thus became the primordial macrocosm reflected in an earthly miniature world. This container or *apsu* pool was used from an earlier time until the end of Babylonian history; it was made of stone and elaborately decorated¹⁸. In the Temple of Solomon, on the other hand, there was nothing that corresponded to the hypostyle hall of an Egyptian temple, but this characteristic was introduced in the palace of Solomon, due to the artistic influence coming from the land of the pharaohs in the whole Levantine area. The "house of the forest of Lebanon" and the "portico of pillars" recall or give an idea of the outer and inner hall of the hypostyle hall of an Egyptian temple.

Solomon's temple generally followed the example of an eastern temple¹⁹. Although it had features in common with the temples of neighboring peoples and kingdoms, it combined those borrowed features in a new and independent way, so that the Jerusalem Temple was one of the most interesting architectural projects in the religious life of the ancient Semites.

¹⁸ M. Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylon and Assyria*, Boston: Ginn & Company 1898, p. 653.

¹⁹ A. Kempinski, *The Middle Bronze Age*, in: A. Ben Tor (ed.), *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press – The Open University of Israel 1992, p. 185–186.

After years of destruction by the king of Babylon Nebuchadnezzar (VI c. BC) the city of Jerusalem remained and survived in a very modest and poor state, even after the Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BC) that overthrew and expelled the reign of the Seleucids, whose last king was Antiochus IV. Restoration work began and set the origin of the celebration of the Jewish holiday of Hannukah, but still without the splendor of the ancient times.

It was with the arrival of King Herod the Great that all this would change dramatically. By the Greek standards of his time, a good king sponsored games and theaters and was active in building to beautify the cities of his kingdom. King Herod is considered one of the greatest builders of the ancient world²⁰.

He built pagan temples and amphitheatres in various Greek cities within and outside his domain. Athens, Sparta, and Rhodes benefited from his liberality and he made large contributions of money to the Olympic Games, a way to build positive propaganda beyond his Jewish borders. Rome was very interested in King Herod's ability to bring peace to the territories on its northeast border and therefore the following territories were integrated into Herod's kingdom: Trachonitis, Batanea and Auranitis in the year 23 BC and the territory of Iturea in 20 BC.

To show greater appreciation of Augustus and to promote the emperor's cultural policy, Herod invested large amounts of money in construction companies. Many old cities were re-founded in magnificent splendor and new ones were built²¹. Temples, racetracks, and amphitheatres were constructed, not just in Judah, but in foreign cities like Athens. Within his own kingdom, he rebuilt Samaria and renamed it Sebaste, in honor of the emperor (Sebastos is the Greek equivalent of the Latin Augustus).

King Herod also rebuilt the Tower of Straton on the beautiful Mediterranean coast and planned a large artificial port. He called the new city Caesarea, also in honor of the emperor. This project lasted about twelve years, from 22 to 10 BC. There are many more projects that might be mentioned throughout the country, settlements and fortresses, many of which bear names that honor the emperor or members of Herod's own family, such as Antipatris (on the road from Jerusalem to Caesarea), Cypros (in Jericho), and Phasaelis (west of the Jordan). He also reinforced the security of the country with military colonies at Gaba in Galilee and at Heshbon, and the fortresses of Alexandrium, Hyrcania, Machaerus, and Masada were made impregnable.

In Jerusalem he built a royal palace for himself, which was connected to the Western Wall, now the Wailing Wall or the Kotel in Hebrew, by means of a walkway, the remains of which are still perceptible today. He rebuilt the Hasmonean

²⁰ M. Avi-Jonah, *Jerusalem of the Second Temple Period*, in: Y. Yadin (ed.), *Jerusalem Revealed. Archaeology in the Holy City 1968–1974*, Jerusalem: The Israel Exploration Society 1975, p. 21–24.

²¹ E. Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2006.

fortress of Baris to the north of the city and renamed it Antonia (in honor of the famous Mark Antony, lover of Queen Cleopatra of Egypt).

However, the greatest of all King Herod's construction ventures is his reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This massive project began in early 19 BC. Although most of the rebuilding work was completed while Herod was alive, the final details were not completed until AD 63, just seven years before its fatal destruction with Titus in AD 70.

The Jews appreciated much of Herod's buildings and achievements, but they would never forgive him for his destruction of the Hasmonean family and they would not forget his Edomite ancestry. Regardless of how much money he spent on the Temple and other projects, he would never end up winning the favor of his subjects. Thanks to the excavations that took place at Herodium, one of the king's fortresses south of Jerusalem, we know that Herod's tomb was sacked a few days after his death²².

3.2. THE RENOVATED TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM IN THE TIMES OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

In the eighteenth year (20-19 BC) of his reign, Herod rebuilt the Temple on a magnificent scale. The king shared a passion for architecture similar to other great kings in history. He had already undertaken reconstruction work throughout the country, so it was not appropriate that the temple in his capital was less magnificent. His intentions also included placating the most pious of his subjects, whose feelings he had often outraged with temples and other pagan buildings.

The Jews did not want their temple to be torn down again, fearing that it would not be rebuilt. To show his good faith and to establish good terms with his subjects, Herod amassed the materials for the new building before the old one had been torn down. The new Temple was rebuilt as quickly as possible and was completed in a year and a half, although the adjacent buildings required an extra eighty years of construction. Since it was illegal for anyone other than a priest to enter the Temple, Herod employed 1,000 of them as bricklayers and carpenters.

At the entrance to the outer temple hung a veil embroidered in blue, white, scarlet, and purple; the outer temple was separated from the holy of holies by a similar curtain called a *parochet*. The outer curtain was folded back on the south side and the inner one on the north side, so that a priest entering the Holy of Holies or *devir* would pass through the outer Temple diagonally. The Holy of Holies was quite empty. In the Holy Place stood the altar of incense. Near the entrance to the

²² *Herod and the Herodian Dynasty*, from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: *History of the Second Temple and Talmudic Era – Online Resources* ([huji.ac.il](http://jewishhistory.huji.ac.il/)), http://jewishhistory.huji.ac.il/interetresources/historyresources/second_temple_and_talmudic_era.htm#Herod [access: 1 IV 2021].

Holy of Holies, a seven-branched golden candelabrum was located to the south and a fir table of showbread to the north. Above the door of the Temple were golden vines and bunches of grapes as large as a man²³. The Temple building had an upper story similar in size to the lower one. Lateral structures, as in Solomon's Temple, allowed space for three floors of chambers on the north, south, and west sides of the Temple. These rooms were connected by doors and hatches that allowed their passage. The total width of the structure, including the side buildings, was 70 cubits.

To the east of Herod's Temple, like at Solomon's, there was a portico 100 cubits wide, 100 cubits high, and 20 cubits deep, extending 15 cubits on each side of the Temple²⁴. Its entrance, which had no doors, was 20 cubits wide and 70 cubits high. Over this entrance, Herod erected a golden eagle, which was later shot down by the Jews, since it was a Roman symbol²⁵. The front of the portico was covered with gold²⁶ and it shone brightest when the rays of the morning sun fell on it; the sensory effect of the sacred was sought both physically and for the spiritual senses.

Josephus narrates that before the time of Herod, the area of the Temple was square, each side was a stadium²⁷, and that Herod expanded the courtyards so much that the perimeter expanded by six stadiums²⁸. If the first part of this account is true, only the length of the Temple area was enlarged, leaving the width the same. Herod is more likely to have enlarged the area in both dimensions, although it is possible that one of the Hasmoneans had already enlarged the size by a square platform. The size to which Herod increased the area was almost that of the present enclosure of the Haram that can be seen today. The sacred space that has expanded since the time of Herod affects only in the northern area²⁹.

In order to expand the space at the top of a hill whose sides had a steep slope, it was necessary to artificially extend the surface of the hill. This was especially done to the south, where the massive masonry can still be seen (at the site traditionally known as the "Stables of Solomon"), which Herod built to support a pavement that was leveled with the surface of the hill more to the north. The complex was surrounded by a crenellated wall³⁰. The total number of doors in this wall is somewhat uncertain, since Josephus and the Mishnah differ. The former claims³¹ that there were four gates in the western wall. Probably one of them was in the south-west corner and led to the upper part of the city over the bridge where the start of

²³ Josephus, *Antiquities* 15,11, §3; *Jewish wars* 5, 5, §4.

²⁴ *Jewish Wars* 5, 5, §4.

²⁵ *Antiquities* 17, 6, §2.

²⁶ *Antiquities* 5, 5, §4.

²⁷ *Antiquities* 15. 11, §3.

²⁸ *Wars* 5, 5, §2.

²⁹ N. Avigad, *The Architecture of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period*, in: Y. Yadin (ed.), *Jerusalem Revealed. Archaeology in the Holy City 1968–1974*, p. 14–20.

³⁰ *Wars* 4, 9, §12.

³¹ *Antiquities* 15. 11, §5.

Robinson's arch can still be seen today³². This bridge, destroyed by Pompey, was rebuilt; in fact, the remains of the same arch on the modern wall are evidence of this reconstruction. There was probably another gate some 600 feet further north, named Wilson's Arch by its discoverer, which supported a walkway through the valley to the city. The doors on the south wall can be traced more easily. Josephus narrates that this southern canvas³³ had doors in the center; they are the gates that the Mishnah calls the "gates of Huldah" and they are still visible in the substructures of the current wall. From them, a double tunnel leads through an inclined plane below the modern Al-Akşa mosque to the level of the Temple courtyards. A short distance away and on the same southern wall, it is also possible to trace a triple door that Josephus does not mention; perhaps it was the second Huldah gate of the Mishnah.

The open space beyond the arcaded cloisters was paved with various types of stone, probably forming a mosaic. This outer court was not, strictly speaking, part of the Temple. Its soil was not sacred and anyone could wander through it, which is why it was known as the Court of the Gentiles. At some distance, one could come to an inner courtyard that rose 15 cubits above the other. It was accessed by fourteen steps. This was the beginning of the sanctuary. It probably coincides with the elevated part that can be seen in the central part of the present Haram area. This elevated courtyard was surrounded by a terrace 10 cubits wide, following the description made by Josephus³⁴. A stone fence surrounded the complex at the level of the steps, called the *soreg*. Inscriptions in Greek and Latin were placed on it at intervals forbidding a non-Jew to enter further than this fence under punishment of death. One of these has been recovered and reads: "No foreigner can pass inside the trellis and the wall around the sanctuary. Whoever is captured, he will be guilty of his own death penalty"³⁵. This enclosure had nine doors. Four of these were in the north, four in the south, and one in the east; the western side had none. The eastern part of this courtyard was separated from the western part and formed the Women's Courtyard. Women could enter beyond the courtyard of the Gentiles into this courtyard. One of the four doors in the north and the other in the south gave access to the women's room, as did the only door that led east from the courtyard of the Gentiles. The remaining six of the nine doors led to the men's courtyard. A large door led from the women's courtyard to the men's courtyard. The entrances had double doors that were covered with silver and gold donated by a Jew named Alexander of Alexandria. The east gate was especially magnificent and was covered with Corinthian bronze. It was the largest of all the gates and was known as the "Nicanor gate" after the name of his donor; it led the way from the

³² For the historical excavations and explorers of Jerusalem: E. Mazar, Y. Shalev, P. Reuven, J. Steinberg, B. Balogh, *The Walls of the Temple Mount*, vol. I–II, Jerusalem: Shoham Academic Research and Publication 2011.

³³ *Antiquities* 15. 11, §5.

³⁴ *Wars* 5, 5, §2.

³⁵ CII 1400, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*.

court of women to the court of men. It was a “great gate” too, 50 cubits high and 40 cubits wide³⁶. Here the great sentences from the court or Bet Din were issued.



Fig. 2 Temple of Jerusalem built by King Herod. In the background, the Golgotha area

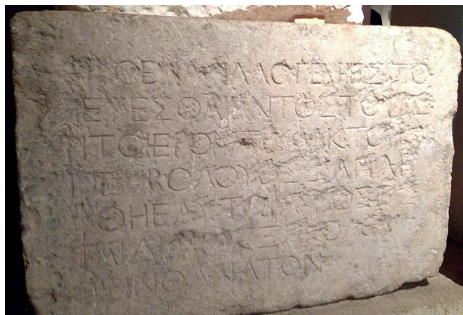


Fig. 3 “The Soreg Warning Inscription” from the Temple of Jerusalem, now in the Istanbul Museum

³⁶ Josephus, *Wars* 5, 5, §3.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Bible describes the Hebrews as outsiders who migrated to Canaan, referred to as the Promised Land in biblical discourse. The first foreigner was, of course, Abraham, who came from Ur in Mesopotamia. However, there does not appear to be any evidence to support this idea that Hebrews are outsiders according to the Bible. A growing number of archaeologists and researchers in other related disciplines came to the conclusion that the Hebrews are not biblical. Moreover, they were actually the Canaanites themselves. Here some support is provided by archaeological records. One of the ways to prove it is through archaeological identification, such as pottery, which is largely similar in both the Canaanite and the Hebrew material culture. The main difference, however, is that the Hebrews did not have the large palaces and temples that characterized Canaanite cities. Canaanite society was organized with a social structure controlled by the aristocracy and priesthood. The Hebrew villages, on the other hand, were more egalitarian. This led to the theory that the Hebrews emerged at a time of cultural decline when the Bronze Age civilization, for largely unknown reasons, collapsed. This provided an opportunity for the lower class and Canaanite serfs or slaves to reestablish an egalitarian society that differed from the earlier Canaanite model of elites. It is possible that nomadic people from Jordan and northern Arabia joined them (here the world of the Exodus would be located, for example).

It was only in the 20th century that scholars began to use new disciplines and expanded historical knowledge to create a more realistic chronology, including precise concepts of when the Earth formed and life developed. There are many sources of historical information³⁷. The West is more familiar with the biblical record. This is certainly a valuable source, but it is difficult to separate mythology and religion from history with certainty. Another important source of information is, again, archeology and recent excavations³⁸ provide increasingly important information. It is also important to note the richly developed histories of Mesopotamia and Egypt which, due to the development of writing, provide valuable written records for the first time. As a result, events and rulers or kings can be dated. This is why it is very important to have a good historical background beyond the Bible since the purely biblical story is suspect. Biblical accounts that can be supported by Mesopotamian and Egyptian archeology and records can be accepted as historical fact with some degree of confidence. Some historians have questioned the existence

³⁷ For more information on Jerusalem: O. Peleg-Barkat, Y. Zelinger, J. Uziel, Y. Gadot, S. Gibson, R. Lewis, *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and its Region*, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2019.

³⁸ N.B.: of which I have been a part for more than twenty years, both in Tel Hazor and the City of David in Jerusalem.

of David. However, in recent years, archaeologists have found a stela that mentions the “House of David” that was defeated in battle (it is the famous Stela of Dan³⁹: it can be seen in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem today).

With the present text and its brief exposition of some examples, the topic continues to challenge anyone who approaches this huge variety of contexts. Thanks to the interactions of several disciplines and studies, where Theology must be included as an important part of the hermeneutics on the field, research can keep a relationship of mutual responsibility and improve the cultural background where Science and Religion meet.

DLACZEGO ARCHEOLOGIA JEST WAŻNA DLA TEOLOGII

Streszczenie

Stary Testament jest wyraźnie mieszkanką mitów i prawdziwych postaci historycznych z ich wydarzeniami. Nie ma wątpliwości co do wkładu mitologii, ponieważ większość Księgi Rodzaju została utworzona na podstawie wspólnych mitologicznych relacji z całego starożytnego Bliskiego Wschodu. Opowieści o stworzeniu, pierwszej parze, ogrodzie Eden, Kainie i Ablu, wielkim potopie i wiele innych są znane w narracjach całego regionu. Chociaż relacje te są mitologiczne, nie oznacza to, że nie zostały ukształtowane przez prawdziwe wydarzenia. Specjaliści spekulują o wielkiej powodzi, która miała miejsce na Bliskim Wschodzie w wyniku podniesienia się poziomu wody pod koniec ostatniej epoki lodowcowej (około 5000 lat przed Chr.). Zbiegło się to w czasie z rewolucją rolniczą, która opanowała Żyźny Półksiężyc i Egipt. Różne ludy Lewantu przyjęły mitologiczne narracje i przeformułowały je, aby stworzyć własne, unikalne i oryginalne opowieści. Niektóre z głównych postaci biblijnych, jak Adam i Ewa, Noe, Lot, wreszcie patriarchowie (Abraham, Izaak i Jakub), były własnymi kompozycjami, ale jak widać na przykładzie patriarchy Abrahama, który nie był postacią wyjątkową wśród narodu hebrajskiego, jego nawrócenie na monoteizm jest jednak czymś charakterystycznym dla duchowej twórczości Żydów. Tu, podobnie jak w Nowym Testamencie, archeologia jest niezbędną pomocą w zlokalizowaniu rzeczywistości i prawdy historii sakralnej i religijnej oraz jej rozwoju w dziejach ludzkości.

Słowa kluczowe: Biblia, Mezopotamia, Egipt, patriarchowie, Izrael, Kanaan, Syria, religia, archeologia, Bliski Wschód.

³⁹ B. Halpern, *The Stela from Dan: Epigraphic and Historical Considerations*, “Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research” (1994), no. 296, p. 63–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1357180> [access: 1 IV 2021]

WHY ARCHAEOLOGY IS IMPORTANT FOR THEOLOGY

Summary

The Old Testament is clearly a mixture of myths and real historical figures and events. There is no question about the contribution of mythology since much of Genesis has been formed from common mythological accounts from all over the ancient Near East. The stories of Creation, the primordial couple, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, the Great Flood, and much more, are commonplace narratives throughout the region. Although these accounts are mythological, it does not mean that they have not been shaped by real events. Specialists speculate about a great flood that took place in the Near East as a result of rising water levels at the end of the last Ice Age (around 5000 BC). This coincided at a time when the Agricultural Revolution had taken over Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. Various peoples of the Levant adopted mythological narratives and reformulated them to create their own unique and original tales. Some of the main figures of the Bible, such as Adam and Eve, Noah, Lot, as well as the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) were a result of their own composition, but as can be seen with the patriarch Abraham, who was not an exclusive figure of the Hebrew people, his conversion to monotheism is, however, something peculiar to the spiritual creativity of the Jewish people. Here as in the composition of the New Testament, archeology is the necessary aid to locate the reality and the truth of sacred history and its development in human time.

Key words: Bible, Mesopotamia, Egypt, patriarchs, Israel, Canaan, Syria, religion, Archaeology, Near East.

WARUM IST ARCHÄOLOGIE FÜR DIE THEOLOGIE WICHTIG

Zusammenfassung

Das Alte Testament ist eindeutig eine Mischung aus Mythen und realen historischen Figuren sowie Ereignissen. Der Beitrag der Mythologie steht außer Frage, da ein großer Teil der Genesis aus gemeinsamen mythologischen Berichten aus dem gesamten alten Nahen Osten gebildet worden ist. Die Geschichten von der Schöpfung, dem ersten Menschenpaar, dem Garten Eden, Kain und Abel, der Sintflut und vielem mehr sind ein fester Bestandteil der Erzählungen in dieser Region. Obwohl diese Erzählungen mythologisch sind, bedeutet das nicht, dass sie nicht von realen Ereignissen geprägt wurden. Fachleute spekulieren über eine große Flut, die im Nahen Osten als Folge des steigenden Wasserspiegels am Ende der letzten Eiszeit (um 5000 v. Chr.) stattfand. Dies fiel in eine Zeit, in der die landwirtschaftliche Revolution den Fruchtbaren Halbmond und Ägypten erobert hatte. Verschiedene Völker der Levante übernahmen mythologische Erzählungen und formulierten sie neu, um ihre eigenen einzigartigen und originellen Geschichten zu schaffen. Einige der Hauptfiguren der Bibel, wie Adam und Eva, Noah, Lot, schließlich die Patriarchen (Abraham, Isaak und Jakob) waren eigene Kompositionen. Aber wie man am Patriarchen Abraham sieht, der keine exklusive Figur des hebräischen Volkes war, ist seine Bekehrung zum Monotheismus etwas, das der geistigen Kreativität der Juden eigen ist. Hier, wie für das Neue Testament, ist

die Archäologie das notwendige Hilfsmittel, um Realität und Wahrheit der Heilsgeschichte und ihrer Entwicklung in der menschlichen Zeit zu lokalisieren.

Schlüsselwörter: Bibel, Mesopotamien, Ägypten, Patriarchen, Israel, Kanaan, Syrien, Religion, Archäologie, Nahe Osten.

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Cayetana H. Johnson – Lecturer Professor of the Faculty of Christian and Classical Literature “San Justino” of San Dámaso Ecclesiastical University of Madrid. She is a specialist in Biblical Archaeology, Comparative Iconography, Biblical Studies, Judaism and their languages (Hebrew and Aramaic). She has a doctorate with the work entitled *The literary and iconographic motif of the Sea Monster as a symbol of redemption*, at the San Dámaso Ecclesiastical University. Since 1996 she has worked in archaeological campaigns carried out in Tel Hazor (Galilee, Israel) and since 2012 in Jerusalem, at the Givati-City of David. She is a contributor to National Geographic Spain. She published as author *Historia antigua del pueblo hebreo* (2020). She also has a section called *Jesús en su tierra* en Radio María-Spain and collaborates in another radio channels as well. Correspondence address: potniatheron65@yahoo.com.