

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 15<sup>TH</sup>, 1930

## EXCAVATIONS AT TELL BEIT MIRSIM, THE ANCIENT KIRJATH-SEPPER

1930 CAMPAIGN.

(*Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary in Co-operation with the American School of Oriental Research at Jerusalem.*)

THIS is not to be a mere narrative account of a work of excavation from day to day; such will appear elsewhere in both scientific form for the archæological world and in popular style for the general reading public interested in Bible lands. Instead, this is to be an evaluation of our work in 1930 at *Tell Beit Mirsim* presented in such a way as to illustrate the value, the special evidential value, of research work anywhere in the land of the Book. The mere gratification of the curiosity to hear of the finding of unexpected things in Bible lands may not contribute much more to Biblical lore than an account of explorations at the North pole or the South. The evidential value of things dug up in Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor is its only permanent, or even worth while, present value. The value in seeing these things is in *seeing what they mean*.

In keeping with this idea of archæological values, an up-to-date archæological expedition is a school, and an account of the work is an Extension course. The work of our Staff in 1930 was the former, and this account is intended to be the latter. The Staff is selected not merely to serve the expedition, but to be trained as Bible land specialists to serve their generation in theological schools and so mould Biblical opinion in the minds of young ministers for the next quarter of a century. Four or five such men are chosen from Old Testament Departments of Universities and Theological Seminaries in various denominations and far distant places in the world. So also the results of our work are being published in America and in Palestine, in Germany and in Finland and Denmark, and now it is a pleasure to give some account in Great Britain.

The reality of this claim of breadth of aim will appear when I say that my colleague in the work, and Director of field

operations, was Dr. W. F. Albright, the brilliant young head of the Department of Semitic Philology in Johns Hopkins University, and the Staff included men from the Pacific School of Religions, the Presbyterian Seminary of Chicago, the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati, Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, the University of Helsinki, Finland, and Expert Palestinian archæologists.

The work at *Tell Beit Mirsim* was begun in 1926, continued in 1928 and now in 1930. Many seasons more will be needed to complete the work at this great Canaanite and Israelite fortress. Like the epoch-making work at Gezer by Professor MacAlister, it is well worth many years' expenditure of time and money. Kirjath-sepher was one of the greatest fortresses of the south at the time of the Conquest and, unlike Gezer, or any other place that has been excavated, the different strata of culture have been but little disturbed by later building operations and the history of the place ends with the Exile and the end of the earlier national life of Israel and Judah. No rubbish of later civilizations, Persian, Greek, Maccabean, Roman Crusader or Arabic are here to confuse the history of culture. Better than any other archæological site yet touched it illustrates in regular order usually in undisturbed layers all the civilizations of the land from before 2000 B.C. down to its final destruction a little after 600 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar. Thus work here affords a complete conspectus of the culture of the land for nearly 2000 years, the whole Canaanite Patriarchal period and the whole National Israelite period. Already the work has progressed to a complete outline of that history, and year by year details of the picture have been added, and will be added, until the history of civilization for that long period in this land—with but one exception, the time of our Lord, the most important period in the history of the world—will be completely laid before us. Much more than this, it will be laid alongside of Biblical history, a contemporary witness and the final test of the historicity of the Biblical account. Before listening to this witness, it may be well to take some character testimony; in other words, scrutinize carefully the comparative value of such contemporary history in attesting historical records. There has been in vogue a long time a school of historians who overestimate the value of chronological schemes. Probably this arises from the fact that anachronisms are fatal to history. Real anachronisms must, of course, be avoided at all hazards. On the other hand, chronology is not a fetish to be worshipped by the

historian. Some who hold most tenaciously to the trustworthiness of the Biblical records yet make the mistake of pinning their faith to somebody's chronological scheme, forgetting that it is only estimated, not revealed. Others, radical in their attitude towards the trustworthiness of the Bible, equally hitch their argument to a chronological scheme and thereby seek to make ridiculous the belief in the trustworthiness of Bible history. Both these methods of interpretation are equally wrong, for the reason that a chronological scheme is not the supreme test of the trustworthiness of history. The supreme test is historical parallels.

In a court of law circumstantial evidence is sometimes able to overthrow direct testimony of individuals, for the reason that men may lie or may be mistaken in their testimony, but circumstances tell the truth and are never mistaken. Now historical parallels are circumstantial evidence and chronological schemes are individual testimony. Such schemes are mathematical; mathematics makes use of numbers and numbers are peculiarly liable to scribal and typographical mistakes. Besides the figurers sometimes manipulate the figures with all subtilty to arrive at a result decided upon before the figuring began. But historical parallels being events, whether good or bad events, are, as events, truthful. They are also beyond the reach of collusion, and so are independent witnesses, the circumstantial evidence of history. Particularly of value are those parallels which are furnished by the spade of the discoverer; *only real events leave anything to be dug up out of the ground.* So that all Biblical narratives which are paralleled by material remains of the events narrated have received, indeed, the supreme test of history. This is the value of the work of the archæologists in Bible lands of which our work at Kirjath-sepher is a sample and illustration. Some instances of discovery and of historical parallels will make this manifest.

The ruins of ten cities are distinctly traceable in this mound; Kirjath-sepher was in itself a decapolis. Each of these ten cities from the bottom to the top is separated from the next by a burned level. This does not mean that we have here ten different civilizations; civil war manifestly played a prominent part in one period of the history. In the Middle Bronze Age, six different cities separated by burned levels were found. The first two of these were representative of a transitional period from Early Bronze to Middle Bronze, but the next four are distinctively and

characteristically Middle Bronze in the pottery remains. As the Middle Bronze Age continued only from three to four hundred years, the city was burned about every fifty years in the average in that Age. It was a time of terrific turmoil. At least, it so impresses one at first thought. When, however, we think of modern civilizations, it is difficult to find any period in any civilized nation, when for a period of fifty years there was no war. And disputed regions, like Alsace Lorraine have been devastated as often as that during the last three hundred years. Each of the other Ages of culture have but one city distinct and complete, although there is indication of different buildings in part in the Late Bronze age, 1600-1200, and perhaps also in the Early Iron II.

The city of the Early Bronze Age before any types of Middle Bronze pottery began to come in, was but a village without a wall. The pottery, however, is most distinctly Early Bronze and exactly the same as found at *Bab ed-Dra'a*, the Great High Place of the Cities of the Plain, as we found in the explorations of 1924 (Cf. *Explorations at Sodom*). Here, at once, comes out one of these attesting parallels of history. The founding of Kirjath-sepher was contemporaneous with the story of Abraham and Lot, the destruction of the Cities of the Plain, and, so, with the Great Break in the Civilization of the Jordan Valley. Our researches in 1924 showed that from that time onward to the end of Biblical History there was no civilization on the Plain, it was uninhabitable as the Bible represents. This, however, does not give any date for any of these events; it only shows them to be contemporaneous. But things which by independent evidence are shown to be contemporaneous are thereby both attested, and most especially when the evidence on one side is dug up out of the ground. Only real events leave material remains.

The Middle Bronze Age, as already intimated, did not come in suddenly by a catastrophic change of civilization, but by a gradual incoming, an infiltration, though the increasing turmoil does not indicate a peaceful penetration. It is interesting again to find here the same gradual change which was found at the Moabite temple of Adar in 1924. It represented the beginning of Moabite civilization after Lot, the father of that civilization, went up into Moab when he was afraid to remain at Zoar. Here again was contemporaneous history indicated by the pottery remains.

Another illustration of historical parallels of far more

important significance appeared in the debris of the earlier Middle Bronze ruins at Kirjath-sepher. It strangely links up with the story of Lot and the angels. These messengers of warning suggested that they remain in the street of Sodom all night. Lot knew but too well the men of Sodom and so insisted that the angels come into his house. They did so. The lascivious mob tried to follow. They battered at the door, but the door *was mob-proof*. These brief details yet reveal much concerning political and sociological conditions at Sodom in that age. Police protection was very poor and house construction was planned accordingly. Now, at Kirjath-sepher in contemporaneous times we found a great courtyard, as of a caravansary, with brazier for cooking and a place for the feeding of horses. Some chick-peas well roasted were found at the brazier, food cooked nearly four thousand years ago! This house had strong walls and a great door, the very large door-socket of which was still *in situ*. So exactly did it conform to the conditions called for by the story of Lot and the angels, that the Staff immediately dubbed this "the Abrahamic house." The same conditions prevailed in Early Iron I, the time of the Judges. At Gibeah of Benjamin, the mob was also foiled by a mob-proof door. These two instances only become significant when we note the strikingly different conditions revealed in the city of Early Iron II, the city of the Kings of Judah from Rehoboam down over the ninth, eighth and seventh centuries to the destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. Here many houses and scores of doorways were found, but a door socket was almost unknown; the people used only archways or curtains. Blessed are the people today who have such protection from thieves and mobs that they may build their houses thus and live, as it were, in the open! Now how would any one writing in the 8th or 7th century under such sociological and political conditions describe, or know to attribute to, the days of Abraham and Lot such conditions as are reflected in the story of Lot and the angels? Was he an eminent archæologist, who, while the Plain of Sodom was still uninhabited yet dug up that ancient civilization and so exactly described the condition that prevailed at that time that the description exactly conforms to the facts as found in the great court at Kirjath-sepher? If there were no Italian or Spanish records, could any one now five hundred years after the days of Columbus write an accurate account of the events of his time! It would seem that the Abraham story must in some ways have

been documented, from the time of the events, either in writing or orally, as in the case of the poems of Homer and the Rig Veda.

The change from Middle Bronze to Late Bronze was catastrophic; only slowly did a new civilization appear, after an unoccupied time, on the Tell. When the new civilization did appear, how different it was. People who are not at all familiar with the pottery chronology, and who are somewhat sceptical concerning the reality of this new historical science, wonder how it is possible to distinguish one Age from another by the pottery. If they had but one glance at a case filled with Middle Bronze pottery and another filled with Late Bronze material, they would no longer doubt. In the Middle Bronze Age was the most beautiful and artistic pottery of this ancient land, strange shapes and thin ware, and, in part a finer, more beautiful clay. Whence? Who can answer that question? In the great Museum at Istanbul one may see in the pottery from Cyprus exactly the same delicate ware made from the same clay. Passing along to the Hittite remains, behold again the same shapes and material. And when one looks upon the Greek pottery from the region of Troy again the same ceramic appears. From which of these various peoples did the others obtain this pottery? or did they all receive it from some other unknown source? If any one could answer that question definitely, we would know more about the Hyksos people and this Middle Bronze, Hyksos Age, than we know now.

But when the Late Bronze Age pottery really appears, there is such a startling difference, that any one may see instantly that we have a different civilisation. Here are now Cypro-Phœnician wine decanters, staggering, grotesquely artistic things, and smaller ones, bibbils for perfumes, in the same style. Along with these are imported Mycenaean ware and decorated Greek vases with wish-bone, or stirrup-shaped handles. This is the ware which drifted down the coast and finally was transformed into what is called Philistine pottery.

Here again a most interesting parallel appears. The Egyptians tell us of the incoming of the "sea-peoples" at that same time, along the same coast land. When the Israelites came in they, having lost their art and crafts in the nomadic life of the desert where no houses were built, now learned from these Philistines. Here at Kirjath-sepher are clearly distinguished three stages in that history. A pre-Philistine period, when little Philistine influence is discernible, a Philistine period, and then a

post-Philistine period. Thus the things dug up here, when laid alongside of Egyptian history and the Biblical record, make a complete historical harmony.

These historical parallels run all the way through this material history at this old fortress. Sometimes an element of humour appears in the parallel. Isaiah must have smiled sarcastically as he wrote his famous diatribe against the foolish fashions of the women of his day. The names he gives to the tight skirts that they could not step out, the permanent waves, and the lip-sticks were different from those in vogue at this present pampered age, but the styles seem to have been much the same. At Kirjath-sepher in the city of the kings of Judah about the time of Isaiah so many vanity palettes were found that it seemed as if every Jewess in the town must have had one. The debris here tells exactly the story that justified Isaiah's arraignment of his generation.

Once again, near the end of the history of this old city, we look in upon the civil life of the people and learn the identity of the destroyer who laid this city waste, a perpetual waste. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the fenced cities of Judah. Was this place one of the doomed cities? It might seem in ordinary historical investigation a hopeless task to try to learn the name of the destroyer who left no name. Yet the dust of ages is a great historian. Jehoiachin reigned but three months and eight days. He was followed by Zedekiah in whose reign came Nebuchadnezzar. Yet here, in the time of the kings of Judah near the end, we have found two stamped jar handles, given as a kind of tax-receipt for taxes paid in kind. The inscription on them is "To Eliakim, the officer of Jehoiachin." Here, in this short reign, are tax receipts showing the kings of Judah still in civil power in the city. Thus the destroyer could not have been Sennacherib, but must have been the next great devastator, Nebuchadnezzar.

These are but a few examples of the historical parallels being furnished by the work of the archæologists. Every new one that appears certifies some event of Biblical narrative as a real event. But I am sometimes asked, "Are there not sometimes Biblical narratives discredited by parallel history dug up in the land?" We are seeking to get the facts, whatever they may be; thus far all parallels attest the Biblical narratives.

MELVIN GROVE KYLE.

St. Louis, Mo., U.S.A.