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Like a Little Candle

By MABEL EWERT

Jesus Light,
Kindle the wick
Of this small candle,
That in its warming flame
Another candle may be touched
To light
Some other place.
The '73 Dig Yields Its Treasures

By SIEGFRIED H. HORN

THE FISHPOOL in Heshbon. During the third season of excavations at Heshbon, we uncovered a most intriguing Iron Age structure in Area B on the shelf just below the acropolis. About 30 feet underneath the present surface and under a 15-foot-deep fill, containing mainly pottery of the Iron II Age and the Persian period, a layer of plaster one foot thick was discovered almost as hard as concrete.

When we reached this hard plaster we thought we had reached bedrock. So convinced was the staff of Area B that it celebrated a "bedrock party." However, when we later observed a potsherd embedded in the supposed bedrock, we made a probe. To our great surprise we discovered that the supposed rock was actually a layer of plaster about a foot thick. In fact, it consisted of three distinct layers of plaster, one upon another, each about four inches thick. The lowest of the three layers rested on bedrock, which we penetrated in several places to make sure that this was the case.

Potsherds embedded in the plaster showed that these layers of waterproof plaster had been laid on bedrock during the Iron Age, and seemed to have been the bottom of a huge, open-air water reservoir. Pieces of straw and other plant material embedded in the plaster were as fresh as if they had been cut from a living plant only a day or two before.

When we made this interesting discovery we were naturally reminded of a Biblical passage in the Song of Solomon 7:4, which mentions the fishpools in Heshbon as a famous feature of that city, in fact, so famous that poets sang about it in distant Jerusalem. Neither open-air pools nor covered cisterns are uncommon in Palestine and if the Heshbon pools had been like any of those in other cities in the country, poets would hardly have mentioned them. Hence, Heshbon's pools in the city near the Gate of Beth-rabbim must have been an unusual structure of renown, worth mentioning in songs. We therefore look with anticipation to future seasons of excavations to see what they will reveal in this respect.

It is also possible that we have uncovered parts of the upper portion of the eastern retaining wall of this water basin. First, an unusual wall was excavated in Square B.2, the Square next to B.1, in which we had found the plaster layer. This wall was constructed in header-stretcher fashion, that is, the stones are laid alternately lengthwise and widthwise. The western face of this wall had been covered with plaster, of which thick patches were still adhering to the wall when we excavated it. Later it was discovered that the continuation of this wall was a bedrock scarp, also plastered on its western face.

In the adjacent Square B.4 two more portions of rock scarp were found, plus a huge rock, now tilted out of place by an earthquake. Its western face had evidently once formed part of the plastered rock scarp already mentioned.

The western faces of the various portions of rock scarp, and the plastered header-stretcher wall, formed one straight line. So far, 42 feet have been exposed by ex-
excavations, and the total length of this wall is not yet known. It had evidently been a continuous water-proof retaining wall of a water reservoir. Only future excavations will show whether the thick layer of plaster at the bottom of Square B.1 should be connected with the plastered wall and plastered bedrock scarp in Squares B.2 and B.4. If so, we can be virtually certain to have discovered one of the famous pools of Heshbon.

A Written Message Deciphered

From the fill of Squares B.1 and B.2 came four ostraca, potsherds containing messages, some written with ink, others scratched into the clay. The text of only one ostraca is well preserved and can be read almost in its entirety. It contains 11 lines of writing in a clear sixth-century B.C. Aramaic script in the Ammonite language. New inscriptions for the king and other high individuals. Through discoveries of inscriptions made in recent years at Heshbon and at Amman the Ammonite language of Biblical times now emerges as a dialect that was related more closely to the Israelite dialect of the northern kingdom than to that of the kingdom of Judah.

The Period of the Maccabees.

During the Hellenistic period when Heshbon was ruled by the Maccabees the water reservoir—if our interpretation of the insallation found in Area B is correct—had probably become leaky, perhaps as the result of an earthquake, which is a frequent occurrence in Palestine. This would explain why the reservoir, which became useless, had been used as a dump and filled with debris that contained a great amount of earlier pottery.

Evidence of extensive building activity during this Maccabean period appeared in several of our excavation areas. The most conspicuous structure of that time so far unearthed is a strong perimeter wall that surrounded the acropolis. Founded on bedrock, this well-constructed defense wall of the summit area of the mound, remained in uninterrupted use almost to the end of Heshbon's history. From this period comes also an ostraca, a potsherd containing some Greek letters and several circles written on it in ink. However, the writing makes no sense and it seems safe to say that it is nothing but a schoolboy's doodling.

Remains of the Roman Period.

During the period when the Romans were in control of the whole country, from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D., the city of Heshbon was called Esbus. During this period, which included New Testament times, there was great building activity as the extant ruins clearly show. It was the custom of that time to found new structures on bedrock and remove the debris of any earlier buildings before erecting new ones. We archeologists do not like this practice, because it usually means that wherever we discover Roman building remains of any size, no traces of earlier structures are left underneath. In contrast to the architects of Roman times, builders in earlier periods usually erected new structures on the remains or debris of earlier ones.

During this period the summit of the mound of Heshbon was crowned by an important building, of which only some impressive remnants of the foundations and substructures remain. In Christian times a large part of these remains were incorporated into the church building erected there. This Roman building on the top of the mound was most probably a pagan temple, which, from its vantage point, overlooked the plains of Moab far and wide. Parts of the monumental stairway leading from the south to the summit have been uncovered, including a section of a decorated stone balustrade. One of these decorated blocks of stone was graciously presented to the expedition by the director of the Department of Antiquities in Amman and eventually will be incorporated into a fine arts building to be erected on the campus of Andrews University. This fine arts building will become the permanent home of the archeological museum now temporarily housed in the James White Library.

In Area C, on the western slope of the mound, we discovered what seems to be a tower of the city's defense system erected in Roman times. A study of the surface features of the area surrounding this structure supports this suggestion. However, more excavations in that area are needed to confirm or modify this interpretation.

Course of a Roman Road

One of the extensive projects carried out during the Roman period was the Emperor Trajan's building of a new road in the early second century A.D. This road served as a connecting link between the great north-south trunk road, already existing, and the road that led from the city of Livias near the Jordan to Jerusalem, via Jericho. The north-south road, which more or less followed the course of that ancient road called "the king's high way" in the Bible (Num. 20:17; 21:22), began at Bosra, the capital of the Roman province of Syria, in the north, passed through Philadelphia, the old capital of the Ammonites (now Amman), and Esbus, our Heshbon, and then continued on toward Petra, the colorful mountain city of the Nabateans.

Evidence of Trajan's road-building activity already had been dis-
covered during our excavations at Heshbon in 1968 and 1971. For example, we had come upon thick chalky limestone layers that had formed the bed of an access road to the summit of the mound. To trace the course of this road down to Livias in the Jordan valley was one of the aims of our topographical survey team, which was in the field throughout the dig’s duration in 1973. By discovering numerous milestones, road stations, and guard towers, as has already been mentioned, the team was able to achieve its objective.

Of the finds of the Roman period a mint-new Elagabalus coin deserves mention. Esbus, the name of Heshbon in Roman times, was an imperial mint only for a short time during the brief reign of Elagabalus (A.D. 218-222). Only a few Esbus coins, of which the British Museum Catalog lists six, are known to exist. From the beginning of our excavations in 1968 we had hoped to find Esbus coins in the ruins of the city where they had been struck. Although we discovered scores of coins from various periods during the 1968 season of excavations, and more than a hundred coins in 1971, we found no Esbus coins. However, this past season we came upon a perfect specimen of the wanted coin, the best Esbus coin known to me. On the obverse the head of the emperor is depicted with an inscription around it, while the reverse shows a picture of a colonnaded temple with a statue, probably of a pagan god, standing in the center. Underneath is the inscription Esbous, the Greek form of the city’s name.

Remains of Christian Heshbon. The major witness of the Byzantine period, when Heshbon was a Christian city and the seat of a Christian bishop, is the remains of a cathedral built in basilica style. It consisted of a central nave, separated from its side aisles by rows of five columns each. The remains of this church, which in Christian times occupied the site of the former Roman temple, had been partially excavated during the previous two seasons. These excavated parts, including the apse in the eastern part of the church, and fragments of multi-colored mosaic floors, have been described in previous reports of our excavations.

The western end of the church, covered by a layer of debris many feet thick, had not been excavated during the two seasons of 1968 and 1971. We hoped to complete the work at the church this past summer and unearth the narthex and western entrance of the church. We accomplished only a part of our aim, because we ran into the unexpected remains of a well-preserved bath installation, built by the Arabs over the ruins of the western end of the church. The church had probably been destroyed by the Persians in A.D. 614, 20 years before the Arabs invaded and occupied the country under their prophet Mohammed.

Best-preserved Bath in Jordan

This bath of Ayyubid-Mamluk times, the best-preserved installation of this kind in Jordan, consists of several rooms all lying one behind the other. Beginning from the south, one enters a small entrance hall that has a stone bench near the door, probably the seat of the doorkeeper. Through the next door one enters the actual bathing room, which had a tiled floor, heated from underneath. At the northern wall of this room stands a stone basin that was fed by pipes with hot and cold water from two plastered tanks, situated in the next room. The hot water tank lay right over the furnace, built of fired bricks. The fourth and last room of this installation was the furnace room, from which the fire in the furnace was fed.

This brief description of the results of the 1973 season of excavations shows that this third Heshbon dig was an exciting experience. Since there is still much to be learned from this site, and because certain structures, such as the water reservoir and city wall of Old Testament times, have hardly been touched by our picks, shovels, and trowels, at least two more seasons of excavations are needed to bring the archeological work at Heshbon to a reasonable conclusion.

The next season of excavations is planned for the summer of 1974 under the direction of L. T. Geraty of Andrews University. I will continue to serve the Heshbon project as adviser.

Concluded