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The 1976 Excavations at Biblical Heshbon (Part 1)

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WITH MOST of its goals reached, the fifth season of archeological excavations at Biblical Heshbon (traditionally identified with Tell Ḥebān, some sixteen miles southwest of modern Amman, in Jordan) came to an official close on August 11, 1976, having begun eight weeks earlier on June 15. Despite skyrocketing costs and unprecedented logistical difficulties (associated primarily with the attempt to obtain enough water for basic necessities), the core staff readily agreed it was the best season to date in terms of results.

Again the chief sponsor of the dig was Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan), under the umbrella of the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman, and with the cooperation of the national Department of Antiquities. Further support came from Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, Michigan), Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, Missouri), Winebrenner Theological Seminary (Findlay, Ohio), Earthwatch (a national effort conceived by the Center for Field Research, Belmont, Massachusetts, to mobilize citizens of all ages in basic field-research expeditions), and the Kyle-Kelso Archeological Fund. The remainder of the dig’s income came from student fees and the generous help of a number of private donors.

Excavation Results on Tell

Projected as the final season of digging at Heshbon, our general stratigraphic goal was to complete the excavation of a representative cross section of the ancient mound’s southwest quadrant, from surface soil to bedrock, by opening up a few new squares, but mostly completing to bedrock all squares that had been opened on the acropolis in all five seasons (1968, 1971, 1973, 1974, and 1976). In addition, of course, certain interesting architectural finds required further investigation. These aims were virtually all achieved, enabling us to work out a sitewide synthesis and correlation of all excavated data, which yielded evidence of at least 23 strata, or ancient cities, at this location, one superimposed on the other, with very few gaps in occupation, over a time period of about 2,700 years. This periodization scheme now becomes the basis for preparation of a final excavation report for Tell Ḥebān.

To describe the results of this past summer’s excavation in greater detail we will start from the earliest occupational evidence on the tell and proceed to the most recent. In the next article in this series we will return to goals and achievements of other aspects of the expedition.

Iron I Period. As with previous seasons, the earliest stratum of occupation attested anywhere on the mound dates back to the Iron I Period (c. 1200-1000 B.C.), the Biblical period of the Judges. The only architectural elements associated with this stratum were a plastered cistern and a 15-foot-deep, 40-foot-long reservoir (?) of undetermined width, and a major wall built of rough, tightly fitting boulders, all of which were on the southern slope and could be dated to the twelfth century B.C. But in the two squares farthest down the hill to the west, a six-foot-deep fill yielded an abundance of sherds from the eleventh century B.C. as well, about 80 circular ceramic loom weights, and an uninscribed seal with a design typical of the period.

Iron II/Persian Period. The most notable structure of this stratum—previously reported from Area B—is undoubtedly the largest such Iron Age reservoir on Jordan’s East Bank. This past summer it was cleared all the way
to its plastered bottom along its 18-foot-deep plastered eastern retaining wall, partially cut vertically through bedrock and partially constructed with stone blocks header-stretcher fashion. Furthermore, the two rounded plastered corners of the reservoir associated with its 50-foot-long eastern wall were also excavated. Tip lines within the excavated portion of the reservoir indicate it was probably square; thus it would have originally held nearly 300,000 gallons of water. Whether the approximate 800 B.C. date of its upper courses applies to its construction or only to its repair could not be ascertained. In any case, if our site is Biblical Heshbon, it is tempting to identify this and the earlier reservoir with the "fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim" mentioned in Song of Solomon 7:4 (verse 5 in Hebrew).

The southernmost portion of the other key structure previously assigned to this stratum, Area C's zigzag defense wall, now appears to have been at least repaired, if not originally constructed, in the Hellenistic Period. Otherwise the Iron II/Persian Period (c. 800-500 B.C.) and the centuries just before and after it—the period of greatest interest to Old Testament students—are represented only by soil layers, primarily in areas B and C.

Hellenistic Period. Evidence points to two strata at Heshbon during this period (c. 250-63 B.C.), the earlier one associated with reoccupation of the site after the Exile, and the later one with the Maccabees. It was during this period that the Area B reservoir was filled with soil, and a lower defense wall was constructed around the base of the tell. A well-built acropolis perimeter wall also protected the summit. Portions of all of these were excavated in 1976. Another series of Hellenistic installations previously reported are the nearby ubiquitous rock-cut caverns called variously cisterns, wine cellars, or storage pits. At least the unplastered ones may now be considered silos, because in the vicinity of possible threshing floors on bedrock, several of them have contained chaff, pyramid-shaped weights, and, in one case this past summer, a perfectly preserved Hellenistic lamp.

Early Roman Period. At least three strata belong to this period (c. 63 B.C.-A.D. 135), one preceding the destructive earthquake of 31 B.C., which also destroyed Qumran, and two, following it. Abundant evidence for the type of domestic quarters of the New Testament period comes from a whole complex of caves, some of them interrelated, in the bedrock of all four digging areas, and the exterior soil surfaces associated with them. One of these produced a beautiful triple-spouted black Herodian lamp with a high central (broken) handle similar to the double-spouted one found in 1974. Some of the caves were rough and simple, others were carefully cut, with interior pillars, walls, and several rooms. The distance from front door to back wall in one such cave in Area C was 40 feet. Other walls and soil layers scattered on the surface in Areas A and C round out the domestic picture, especially when it is supplemented with numerous contemporary objects from tombs to be described in the next article. Previous reports have described the long sequence of roadways or plazas found across Areas B and D (the southern entrance to the acropolis), which began in this period with associated curbs and continued without interruption on into the Byzantine Period.

The Hellenistic acropolis perimeter wall appears to have been repaired and buttressed in this period, perhaps as a result of the 31 B.C. earthquake. But the period's most impressive preserved architecture belonged probably to Area C's high (nearly 20 feet preserved) stone
tower, whose northeastern foundation trench went down through about 15 feet of Iron Age fill to reach bedrock. Its western façade and interior seem to have been rebuilt in Late Roman and Early Byzantine times when the structure saw continued use, surely as some type of public building.

**Late Roman Period.** Occupation at Heshbon continued through at least two strata during this period (c. A.D. 135-324). At first there was basically a continuation of the Early Roman features, but then came the construction of the Area D monumental stairway, right over previous walls and houses. First discovered in 1973, this imposing stairway was traced further west this past summer until its entire preserved width of more than 40 feet was exposed. Along the entire stretch of its base it was associated with contemporary plastered roadway or plaza layers. Obviously this grand southern entrance to the acropolis must have led to an important public structure at the summit. Several imposing Late Roman walls in Area A suggest the presence of a temple during this period—one that was oriented toward the east and preceded by a paved platform and a stylobate wall that would have supported four columns. In fact, this temple may even appear on the rare Elagabalus coin minted at Esbous (Roman Heshbon) c. A.D. 220, two examples of which have been discovered by the expedition. These exterior temple walls and many of its finest architectural fragments (such as pillar bases and capitals) were later reused in the Byzantine basilica that succeeded it.

**Early Byzantine Period.** No less than six strata belong to this active period at Heshbon (A.D. 324-450). In all of these the monumental Roman stairway of Area D continued in use, but with each there was a new resurfacing of the adjoining roadway or plaza, which naturally gradually raised its level in relation to the stairway. From off the stairs in a secondary Early Byzantine context came the prize artistic find of the season: a finely executed ivory plaque depicting "Prometheus Bound." True to the myth, he stands with his arms above him, his wrists chained to the rocks, while a vulture eats out his entrails—all this a punishment for his having revealed to man the secret of fire.

The destructive earthquake of A.D. 365 provided a midpoint for the Early Byzantine strata. It apparently strewed rocks clear across the Area B plaza, caused massive collapse in a subterranean installation in Area C, and may have been the occasion for the Early Byzantine rebuilding of the high Roman tower in Area C, where a cooking pot, juglet, and unique four-spouted lamp (whose handle ends in the eye and beak of a bird) represent the refurbishing.

The last Early Byzantine stratum (c. A.D. 400-500) represents a major new development at the site. By at least partially reusing existing Roman architectural fragments and some Roman walls as foundation, a basilica-type Christian church was constructed. Probably at the same time, the large Area B kiln discovered in 1968 was built to produce the lime needed for plaster in the new church. Both the church and the kiln have been described in previous reports. This past season, however, we were able, finally, to clarify some of the
problems connected with the narthex, which remains mostly buried under a later Mamluk bath complex.

**Late Byzantine Period.** Evidence for at least two strata from this period (c. A.D. 450-661) was found, primarily associated with the ecclesiastical structures on the acropolis, most data having disappeared from lower down on the sides of the mount (Areas B and C), due probably either to erosion or robbing. In the mid-sixth century A.D., the church in area A, or perhaps rooms associated with it, were extended considerably to the west and a fine paving surrounded it on the south.

**Umayyad Period.** The first Arab period (c. A.D. 661-750) is represented by at least one stratum, with substantial remains again only within the acropolis perimeter walls. A house on the flagstone floor in Area D and the unusually large (6 feet in diameter, 3 feet deep) and well-preserved ceramic oven cut through a Byzantine mosaic floor in Area A have been described in previous reports. Though no major new finds from this period were made on the tell proper, some important data was uncovered in two soundings in the modern village to the south of the tell.

**Abbasid Period.** Again, the remains of this period (c. A.D. 750-969) comprise only one stratum at Heshbon. In addition to an Area B stone-lined pit, which had previously provided the best evidence, this last season yielded several new soil layers in Area A.

**Ayyubid/Mamluk Period.** After a gap of more than 200 years represented by some pottery but no architecture or soil layers, came at least three strata (c. A.D. 1200-1456), which appear to have been a real renaissance for Heshbon, shortlived though it was. All Areas have produced some evidence. The vaulted room and series of cisterns from Area D were previously reported, as were numerous habitation caves, both on and surrounding the tell. The largest one by far, however, was discovered only this past season in Area B. One hundred yards in extent and in some places two stories high, it may be more properly termed a cave-cistern complex. Too large to excavate in the final season, it was only explored; from off the surface came two large, beautifully glazed Mamluk bowls. A large complex of domestic buildings— with well-preserved walls, intact floors and thresholds, and numerous artifacts—was laid bare in the eastern sector of Area C.

The Area A vaulted room, courtyard with associated channels and cisterns, and the well-preserved bath complex have all been reported before. Immediately adjacent to the bath’s western wall, between it and the acropolis perimeter wall, however, another major Mamluk architectural complex was excavated in 1976. Its central feature was the finest flagstone-paved courtyard so far found at the site. Opening onto the northern side of the courtyard were four thresholds from adjoining corridors and rooms, while on the southern side, there were only three—including a round-about indirect-access corridor from the bath. The courtyard may have remained open to the west, since its entire width from north to south was at one time spanned by an arch whose well-cut springers both remained in situ. Altogether these well-preserved and related Mamluk structures in Area A indicate a high level of creativity on the part of their builders.

Following the Late Mamluk stratum at Heshbon there was another gap in occupation of about 450 years until the settlement of the Modern Period, which has taken place since World War I. (To be continued)