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Excavating Biblical Heshbon

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The holiday bells, with their voices of gold,
Ring in the new year as they ring out the old.
While ringing they're bringing a message so clear,
Inspiring new dreams full of hope and great cheer.
These dreams can come true and success will be ours,
If we can remember through life's fleeting hours

To make the world brighter and better each day
By smiling at people on life's weary way,
By lifting their load as they're limping along,
By sharing our faith or by singing a song,
By penning our poems inspiring fresh hope,
By helping solve problems with which men must cope.

By sweet'ning our motives, improving our arts,
By starting fresh fires in cold rooms and cold hearts.
By finding true values in Heaven's great plan,
By seeing the good in each frail fellow man.
By noting the beauty still flooding the earth,
And thanking the Lord for the things of real worth.

With joy face the future; let courage now rise
With hope in our hearts and with smiles in our eyes.
With love in our labors and peace in our souls,
Our dreams can come true and we'll reach life's great goals!
With happy bells ringing the gospel of cheer,
We thrill with the challenge of this great new year!
THE summer of 1971 marked the second season of excavations at Biblical Heshbon. The archeological project at this site, the first city conquered by the Israelites after the Exodus, is sponsored by Andrews University.

The first season of excavations at Heshbon was conducted in the summer of 1968 and was reported in a series of articles in the Review (Jan. 2-30, 1969). Since three years have passed since that time, it will be helpful to review briefly the history of the ancient city as well as the history and results of the first Heshbon expedition. Subsequent articles will discuss the organization of the Heshbon expedition, methods employed in our archeological work, and finally the results of this last summer’s work. There will also be a brief mention of future plans.

The History of Heshbon

The Bible is the only source of information for the early history of Heshbon. The city is mentioned in 19 passages, from the Pentateuch to Jeremiah. Heshbon is situated in what the Bible calls the “plains of Moab,” and was originally a Moabite city. However, the Amorites under King Sihon took it from the Moabites and made it into the capital of an Amorite kingdom, which was sandwiched between the Moabite kingdom in the south and the Ammonite kingdom in the north.

This was the political situation when the Israelites entered the country. Asking permission from Sihon to pass peacefully through his country to reach the river Jordan, they were refused and met instead by Sihon’s army. The Amorites were defeated in the encounter, and their city and country were taken over by the victors.

Heshbon was assigned to the tribe of Reuben, but later became a possession of the tribe of Gad. It was named as one of the cities of the Levites and in Solomon’s time was the administrative headquarters of one of the provinces into which the Israelite country was divided. When in the ninth century B.C., King Mesha of Moab, who had been a vassal of the northern kingdom of Israel, successfully rebelled against his overlord and regained his independence, he conquered much Israeliite territory including Heshbon. The Moabite Stone, an inscribed monument discovered in 1868, and now in the Louvre in Paris, gives us information about this rebellion. Hence, the prophet Isaiah includes Heshbon in his denunciation of several Moabite cities. In Jeremiah’s time the city seems to have changed hands again: the prophet first mentioned Heshbon as a Moabite city, later as an Ammonite possession.

During the Maccabean wars of independence in the second century B.C., Heshbon once more became an Israeliite city, for Josephus states that it was in the hands of the Maccabean king Alexander Janneus. Herod the Great made it a garrison city, probably to defend the eastern part of the kingdom against the Nabataeans. In Christian times Heshbon became the seat of a bishop. Three bishops from this city are known by name from contemporary ecclesiastical sources. During the Persian invasion of A.D. 614 Heshbon probably shared the fate of many Palestinian cities whose churches were destroyed. Twenty years later, when the Mohammedan Arabs invaded the country, Heshbon became an Arab city, and, according to Arab sources, the district capital of the Belqa. The city flourished for the last time in the Mameluke period of the 13th and 14th centuries. After that it was completely abandoned, either as the result of a devastating earthquake or the outbreak of the plague, which repeatedly depopulated certain areas of the world during the Middle Ages. For the next 600 years no one inhabited the ruin mound. New life came to Heshbon when in recent times a number of families of four Bedouin tribes were...
settled on the southern and southeastern slopes of the mound. They comprise the present Arab village of Ḥeṣbān, which provided most of the workmen of Andrews University’s Heshbon expedition.

History of the Heshbon Expedition

Early in 1966 an offer came to Andrews University to finance three seasons of excavations at a Biblical site. I was at that time entrusted with organizing and directing the expedition. After careful deliberations and a survey of prospective Biblical sites in Palestine west and east of the Jordan River, Heshbon was chosen as the site to be excavated. The reasons for choosing Heshbon were that (1) it had been an important Biblical city whose site had never been touched by the pick and hoe of an archeologist; (2) a new hardtop road had made the site accessible; (3) it was close to the capital city of Amman (which was 15 miles to the southwest); (4) the mound was government-owned, which meant that the excavation site did not need to be bought or rented and that the excavated areas did not need to be filled in again or restored to their original conditions after the close of the excavations; and (5) water as well as local labor was readily available.

The first season of excavations was then planned for the summer of 1967. The cooperation of the American Schools of Oriental Research was obtained, and a number of professional archeologists with whom I had worked at other sites were willing to join the Heshbon staff. Also volunteer photographers and surveyor-architects, an anthropologist, and other experts were obtained. Many applications of graduate students, ministers, teachers, and others were received. Thus a staff of about forty members, consisting of professionals and learners, was secured for the 1967 expedition. The government of Jordan issued an excavation permit on my request.

The expedition never materialized. The six-day war between
Israel and its Arab neighbors forced me to cancel the dig one day before the excavations were to begin. This was not only a great disappointment to many but also resulted in a substantial financial loss because several staff members had either already traveled to Palestine or were on their way to the Near East.

Returning to America after having been evacuated from the war zone in a U.S. Air Force plane, I found to my amazement that my political developments. While sporadic clashes between the guerrillas and the Jordanian army took place from time to time—and in fact did not end until all armed guerrillas had been expelled from the country in July, 1971—it was clear in April that the guerrilla movement had been so weakened that our planned expedition would probably not be endangered. I thus advised President Hammill to give the green light. When his permission was received, final word went out to all staff members to proceed with their plans to take part in the excavations.

It can now be reported that a most successful season of excavations—the second in the series of three planned from the beginning—was conducted from July 5 to August 20, 1971, with a staff of 40 foreign and 12 Jordanian members, plus an additional labor force of about 140 local people.

Fellowship of Prayer

SON AND DAUGHTER RECLAIMED

Some time ago I asked you to remember my son and daughter in prayer, as they had left the church. Both my son and daughter are now faithful members of the church. I know that your prayers, along with ours, were instrumental in winning them back to our Lord.

Now, please add to your prayer list the names of a young couple with whom we have been studying for several months. They have accepted doctrines, but have been unable to give up smoking. My wife and I took them to a Five-Day Plan, but even then didn’t work. The wife is 26 and has emphysema and bronchitis. The doctor has warned her that she must quit, or it will destroy her. Please accept our gratitude for the prayers I know you will offer in behalf of this young couple.—Mr. S., of Farmington, Washington.

PRAYER ANSWERED AFTER 25 YEARS

Several years ago I requested prayer for my daughter. After 25 years or more out in the world, she has returned to the church and we are so happy. Now I have three other children and their families outside the fold. Please pray that they will return before probation closes. Time is so short.—Name Withheld.

GOD’S GOODNESS APPRECIATED

A few years ago I wrote asking an interest in your prayers for a mentally ill mother and for the saving of my husband. I am happy to tell you that wonderful provision was made for my mother to be taken out of the hospital, where she was not improving, and taken into her sister and brother-in-law’s home far from here. Under their tender care she has been steadily regaining her health. Three years ago my husband was convicted at camp meeting and has been earnestly serving the Lord ever since. These two answers to prayer, when all seemed hopeless for them, have made me so much more confident in the Lord. I thank Him every day for His goodness and mercy toward us.

Now I would like to add another request for an interest in your prayers. My husband and I are very anxious that our three daughters receive a Christian education, but we are so far from an academy, and the expense involved is beyond our means. We realize that the Lord has many ways we know not of to answer our prayers. Please pray that God will work with our efforts to place our children in a Christian school.—Mrs. K., of Montana.

PRAYER ABUNDANTLY ANSWERED

About a year ago I requested prayer for a friend who had a drug problem. This prayer has been answered abundantly. We are so thankful for this, as he is now a great help to his church.

Approximately two years ago I wrote asking prayer for a daughter and son-in-law, both graduates of one of our colleges, who had drifted away from church attendance. Since then they have moved to a place where they cannot attend church and our daughter goes occasionally and takes the children. I wish to renew this request for prayer, however, as they are becoming entangled with worldly friends in the new place. We are glad there is no smoking and drinking problem, but our son-in-law is working on Sabbath.—Name Withheld.

REFORMATION OF SONS

Some time ago I wrote asking prayer for my sons. One was discouraged, and the other had married a Catholic girl and had left the church. Since then my son and his wife have joined the church and are active members. The other son has returned, but is struggling with the smoking habit. Please pray that he will be able to overcome and will remain faithful.—Mrs. F., of British Columbia.

This column is dedicated to the encouragement of prayer for others at the sunset hour each Friday evening. Because of the large number of requests received and the complexities of the problems presented it is impossible for us to answer each letter personally, but all requests will be acknowledged and will be kept on file in our office. Portions of letters, especially those that tell of answers to prayer, will be published as space permits.

(Continued next week)