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Touching the Past (What's New in Archaeology)

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Michael Hasel

Walking in the footsteps of Solomon and Ahab is one thing, but to uncover one of their ancient cities adds a new perspective to the expression “to reach out and touch the past.” For the past three years, Southern Adventist University has been a consortium member of the Hazor excavations sponsored by the Israel Exploration Society and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The ancient site of Hazor served as “the head of all those kingdoms,” according to the account in Joshua 11 that relates the destruction of the city and its king Jabin (vs. 10). But what is the historical background of this biblically attested event? In recent years, a cuneiform tablet written in ancient Akkadian was found that names the king of the city as a certain *Ibni-Adu*. The first part of the name is the Akkadian equivalent of the Hebrew *yabin*, or Jabin.

The biblical description of “head of all those kingdoms” fits the huge 200-acre site of the Canaanite period

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that was strategically part of a vast international trade network spanning to Mari and across to ancient Babylon. An account found at ancient Babylon recounts a dream in which a man journeys to the end of the Earth. In that dream, the last city he encounters is Hazor. This is only one item confirming that Hazor was the end of the vast trade network of major city-states of that period.

The size of the city in comparison with others in Canaan is also telling. “The city of Hazor is 10 to 20 times the size of any other contemporary city in Canaan and was by far the most important city of the second millennium BCE in Israel,” according to Amnon Ben-Tor the director of Hazor excavations. In the past several years, staff and archaeology students have uncovered enormous mud brick walls spanning 4 to 5 meters across and the remains of a palace. The Canaanite palace was occupied in the Late Bronze Age during the time of Joshua. Was this the palace of Jabin, king of Hazor?

Joshua 11:10-13 states, “Joshua turned back at that time and took Hazor, and struck its king with the sword; for Hazor was formerly the head of all those kingdoms. And they struck all the people who were in it with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them. There was none left breathing. Then he burned Hazor with fire. So all the cities of those kings, and all their kings, Joshua took and struck with the edge of the sword. He utterly destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded. But as for the cities that stood on their mounds, Israel burned none of them, except Hazor only, which Joshua burned” (NKJV). Two points are clarified with this statement. First, Joshua killed Jabin the king of Hazor. Second, he burned Hazor with fire, unlike the other sites in the area of northern Canaan. In fact, the Bible specifies that only three sites were burned during the conquest: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor.

The Canaanite palace was built of mud brick, had a beautiful wood floor throughout the palace, and contained a central courtyard with surrounding rooms. The size and architectural design of the palace clearly points to connections with northern Canaan and Mesopotamia. It was completely destroyed in a conflagration reaching 1,300 degrees Celsius. We can know the temperature of the fire because mud bricks

and pottery were found melted. Laboratory tests indicate that a minimum temperature of 1,300 degrees Celsius is required for the melting of pottery and mud brick.

In previous seasons, several statues were found within the palace with heads and hands removed, reminiscent of practices at other sites where gods were “disabled” after the defeat of a city. How did the palace get this hot? Fragments of large storage jars were found that may have contained olive oil, and the palace itself stood at a high point on the site. Afternoon winds could have whipped up the blaze. If this was indeed the fire destruction described in Joshua, then it left very little of the palace. Today, a large roof structure stands over the palace to protect the mud brick from erosion and rains. Busloads of visitors walk on the reconstructed wood floor of the palace and wonder at the significance of its destruction.

For years, archaeologists excavating Hazor have been searching for the library of the city. Such libraries or archives have been found at similar sites dating to the same time period. At Ugarit in Syria more than 15,000 tablets were found in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the palace at Ebla produced more than 20,000 texts written in a previously unknown language. Alalakh, a site with a palace of similar design to the one uncovered at Hazor, contained two

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rooms filled with hundreds of written records. It is believed that Hazor might contain two such important libraries, and the significance of such a discovery for the history of the region cannot be overestimated. It is like finding a needle in a haystack, but it is what keeps archaeologists returning year after year.

The city of Hazor was also inhabited and expanded during the reigns of Solomon and Ahab. The massive six-entry way gate dating to Solomon was found in the earlier excavations of the 1950s. The city was subsequently expanded under King Ahab.

During the past several years, efforts have been made to clear away the Iron Age remains and continue to expand the exposure of a huge building or fortification system. Chris Chadwick, a senior archaeology major, worked last year for the full six-week season trying to get to the floor of the huge mud brick wall structure. He could not contain his excitement. "Finally we reached the floor where the important pottery would reveal the date of the building," he reported. "Currently it would seem that the date of the building was Middle Bronze [period of Joseph], but we will have to wait until next season to be sure." Two of the highlighted small finds of the

season was a jar stopper with two Egyptian seal impressions and a seal from Mesopotamia that had never before been attested in Israel.

As one of our graduate students was excavating a wall from Ahab's city one day, she suddenly noticed a strange figurine. The head was missing, and the arms were gone. But it was immediately recognizable as one of the hundreds of pillared female figurines found in Israel. A number of scholars believe she was the representation of Asherah, consort of Baal. And where was she discovered? In the city of Ahab. The Bible tells us that "four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, [ate] at Jezebel's table" (1 Kings 18:19, NKJV).

As cities like Hazor continue to reveal their secrets, our understanding of the Bible and its world will increase exponentially. It often takes only one find to overturn the most eloquent theory about the past or increase our knowledge of the present. In 2007, Southern Adventist University will again be in the field excavating the "head of all those kingdoms." If you are interested in a life-changing experience, you may contact the Institute of Archaeology at <http://archaeology.southern.edu>.

