

Nuancing the Stone: Archaeology and the Bible

By Jonathan Reed, PhD, University of La Verne

Did you find anything?

That's the question I've faced every August for some twenty years. Whenever I return from archaeological work in Israel, friends, relatives, and students want to know what I've discovered. While I like to think of myself as a Syro-Palestinian archaeologist excavating in Roman-period Galilee, they call me a biblical archaeologist digging in the Holy Land.

And they imagine that I'm looking for treasures from Solomon's Temple or relics like the Holy Grail. Like most people, their views of archaeologists have been shaped more by movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (I love it!), or worse, made-for TV documentaries touting some forgery and fraud that scholars rightly frown upon.



Sherds from a Galilean site (photo courtesy Rami Arav).

There have been very few spectacular finds in spite of hundreds of excavations across the lands of the Bible, which include Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and if one includes the New Testament, throw in Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy. Only a miniscule percentage of all finds ever make it into a museum. But archaeologists working in these countries

aren't looking for a single great discovery. Instead, they dig meticulously through **strata**—a fancy word for dirt and rocks that have accumulated in layers over the centuries—and catalogue tiny pieces of pottery called **sherds**, sifting for scraps of animal bones or the occasional corroded bronze coin. Rarely, if ever, do archaeologists find even the tiniest piece of gold or silver, or a prized **epigraphic** find, that is to say an object like a tablet or seal with writing on it.

Most archaeologists spend the summer dig seasons uncovering floors, many of them beaten earth, that they carefully brush and photograph; and they find walls, most of whose stones have since been robbed and reused atop those earlier buildings. They spend much of their energy trying to untangle the jumble of stones and floors and reconstruct the layers of a complex three-dimensional puzzle. They work long hours in the lab drawing, photographing, and cataloging mundane finds—the garbage of antiquity—that are used to date those layers and which help analyze what life was like for the people living at the time of those layers.

Those tasks rarely make the pages of newspapers or air on TV-documentaries and the bulk of discoveries are not museum-worthy. But the meticulous work is worth it. Modern archaeologists are part of a century-long process of discovering the world in which the stories of the Bible took place. All of those discoveries, however mundane, have over the decades transformed our understanding of what life was like in biblical times.

By looking at sites in Israel and across the Middle East from what archaeologists call the **Iron Age**, (1200-587 BCE) for example, we can compare the life of the Israelites around the time of King David with that of their neighbors. The Israelites lived in small and simple villages up in the hills, used unadorned and even crude pottery, and rarely made **inscriptions**, suggesting widespread illiteracy. Their architectural achievements, in terms of palaces or fortifications, were insignificant and even backward, compared to more urban, cosmopolitan, economically advanced, and culturally sophisticated **Philistines** who lived along the Mediterranean coast. Though ironically, because of the biblical writers' contempt for the Philistines, today the word Philistine has come to mean something akin to a barbarian, one who is indifferent to artistic or intellectual achievements. Whatever grandeur terms like "Kingdom of Israel" or "King David" conjure up in popular imagination, from an archaeological perspective and compared to the geopolitical powerhouses like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, Israel was more a sleepy pastoral backwater than a kingdom to be taken seriously in the Ancient Near Eastern halls of power.

Another example from about a millennium later, at a time archaeologists call the **Early Roman period** (popularly known as "the time of Jesus," 40 BCE – 135 CE), illustrates how excavations transform our understanding of the New Testament world. I've spent



An overview of Sepphoris (Photo courtesy Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com).

many summer excavating the ruins of **Sepphoris**, a site never mentioned in the New Testament. But it was made into the capital of **Galilee**, and together with the newly-founded city **Tiberias** (also never mentioned in the New Testament), these two cities changed life in Galilee. What had previously been a rural, agrarian, and village culture was being urbanized in the first half of the first century CE. Galilee was subject to all of the benefits and strains—the good and the bad—that cities brought. One thing is clear as I've excavated at Sepphoris: the city's inhabitants were much wealthier than the surrounding villagers. I've found little shards of imported pottery, pieces of expensive glass perfume bottles, broken pieces of ivory hairpins, tiny square stones called **tesserae** used in colorful mosaics, and little fragments of painted plaster called **fresco** that once decorated walls. All these little scraps from antiquity—what archaeologists call artifacts—are clues that the citizens of this city lived the good life.



Ancient Cosmetics containers (Photo courtesy of Zev Radovan)

While these hundreds of little finds point to Sepphoris' wealth, their absence in the nearby village of **Nazareth**, or at places like **Capernaum** that the gospels associate with Jesus, indicates their relative poverty. And it tells us, to use a modern metaphor, which side of the tracks Jesus hung out at. None of those little and seemingly insignificant finds, in and of themselves, are worth mentioning as a great discovery. But collectively, they have transformed my view of Galilee. They have helped me appreciate the striking differences in biblical antiquity between city and country, rich and poor, differences that were just beginning to manifest themselves in Galilee at the time Jesus.

So now I can say: *Yes, I found something.*

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Glossary

BCE and CE, Before the Common Era and the Common Era, respectively. The common scholarly terms used for BC and AD.

Capernaum, fishing village on the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel that the gospels associate with Jesus' ministry.

Early Roman Period, historical era in which Rome dominated politically, in the Ancient Near East typically dated from 50 BCE to 135 CE.

Epigraphic, relating to ancient objects that are inscribed with writing.

Fresco, decorative painting on a plaster wall or ceiling inside a home.

Galilee, area in northern Israel that is traditionally associated with Jesus' life and ministry.

Inscription, an object with writing incised or engraved on the surface.

Iron Age, historical era in which iron tools and weapons came into use; in the Ancient Near East, this is typically dated to 1200 to 587 BCE.

Nazareth, small village in Galilee that is traditionally considered Jesus' home town.

Philistines, a people who inhabited the coastal area of southern Israel during the Iron Age and were traditional enemies of the Israelites.

Sepphoris, one of the largest cities in Galilee during the Galilee, only four miles from Nazareth.

Sherd, a fragment of an ancient piece of pottery that archaeologists use to date layers; sometimes called potsherds, often spelled shard.

Stratum (pl. strata), a layer on an archaeological excavation from a particular historical period, made up of soil, rocks, and embedded with artifacts.

Tessera (pl. tesserae), a small, colorful, square-shaped stone used in mosaic floors.

Tiberias, one of the largest cities in Galilee during the Roman period, named after the Roman emperor Tiberius.

Activity

Ask each student to write down the most expensive or valuable item that they can think of in their home. Then imagine, if hundreds or thousands of years from now, a future archaeologist were to discover that item, what would it tell those archaeologists about their family? Would it reveal the key characteristics of their family—its size, ages, gender, or income? If it were displayed in a future museum, what features would be pointed out to explain the culture it represented? What would this item tell a future archaeologist about what people found valuable, and why?

Then ask each student to quickly think about the contents of their garbage cans. Have them write down as fast as they can ten items that would be inside. Again, imagine a future archaeologists

excavating their home and finding the contents of the garbage can. Would those pieces of trash reveal the key characteristics of their family? Think about size, ages, gender, or income. If any of the trash were displayed in a future museum, what would visitors learn about family life, material culture, and values in the early 21st century?

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>