

Digging for History

When the Israelites entered the land promised by God to their forefathers, Joshua assigned 48 'cities' to the tribe of Levi, as Moses had

instructed. One of these cities was Beth-Shemesh, in the territory of Judah (Joshua 15; 21), less than 20 miles west of Jerusalem and overlooking the Sorek Valley where Samson was to meet Delilah (Judges 16). It was in this same valley where the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh would be reaping their wheat harvest when they saw the ark of the covenant being returned by the Philistines years later (1 Samuel 6).

The site has been excavated during three periods in recent times. The first was just over a hundred years ago, in 1911-12, by the Palestine Exploration Fund, with further excavations made by Americans between 1928-33. More recently, since 1990, the site has been excavated on a more or less annual basis under the directorship of Shlomo Bunimovitz and Zvi Lederman of Tel Aviv University. Dale

Manor of Harding University in America serves as field director, and was my initial point of contact with the dig.

When the opportunity arose

for me to be a part of the 2014 excavation, I was delighted. Having never been to Israel before, this was an opportunity not only to



visit a number of sites associated with the Biblical narrative but also to experience, first hand, the process of archaeology upon which so much of our understanding of the land of the Bible depends. A four week stay in the country, living and working within the local culture, would allow me to better understand something of how the place works whilst also enabling me to soak up something of the local terrain. For me, this was the way to do it!

Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh have revealed occupation from at least as far back as the Middle Bronze Age (from about 1800 B.C.) when Canaanites occupied the land, continuing until Iron Age II when the Assyrians destroyed the city in 701 B.C., with only minor occupation subsequent to that. During the Late Bronze and Iron Ages, Tel Beth-Shemesh found itself at the geographic meeting point of three different ethnic and cultural groups: Canaanites, Israelites and Philistines, making the site particularly interesting as a



scene of significant historical events and cultural changes.

This year's excavations focused primarily on a section immediately to the north of a unique Iron Age temple complex discovered during the previous season. This structure which contained shards of painted chalices and goblets, along with three large flat stones, has provoked considerable interest and is believed to possibly be connected to some early Israelite cultic ritual. It was intentionally desecrated by later occupants, possibly under the reforms of kings Hezekiah or Josiah.

There were just under three dozen working on the site this year, and all were assigned to specific areas for the four-week dig. The square to which I was assigned was located immediately beside this temple structure but at a lower level – working towards the remains of a Late Bronze Age palace structure immediately to our north.

Rising each morning at four o'clock, we arrived on site about an hour before sunrise to take advantage of light and heat factors. The constant view north across the Sorek Valley was most evocative. From the pass in the west leading towards the land of the Philistines from which the ark returned, to the site of Timnah and its associations with Judah, Tamar and later Samson, there was much to occupy the mind. If only these stones would speak!

Apart from the plethora of pottery sherds, bones and reasonable number of stone

tools which we uncovered, among this year's more 'notable' artefact finds was an Iron Age seal depicting a man and a lion, a ceramic rattle fragment, a large ceramic censer stand, and a 19th Dynasty Egyptian scarab seal for Amun-Re. Each piece going together to form the overall picture of what was happening at Beth-Shemesh some 3,000 years ago.

The weekends provided opportunity to travel and explore a little more of this

remarkable land. An excursion to the south enabled me to visit the sites of Lachish, Tel Arad, Masada and En Gedi, along with an obligatory float in the Dead Sea. Another to the north took us to Megiddo, Bet Alpha, Beth Shean, Galilee, Caesarea Philippi and Caesarea Maritima. My day at Qumran was a real treat and the days I spent in Jerusalem have persuaded me of its unique nature and of a need to return.

If you would be interested in hearing more of this expedition, of the processes of archaeology, of the Biblical significance of discoveries, or of my experiences 'in the field' then please get in touch. I am putting together a number of presentations for congregations that have already expressed an interest in hearing more and have listed these on the British Bible School web site.

You might also like to refer to my growing blog at: <http://postsfrompatrick.blogspot.co.uk>



Pictured with the 19th Dynasty scarab seal I found.