

Summer Quarter in Israel 1978

by John C. Jeske

A significant experience came to an end for 48 Lutherans of our fellowship (46 WELS, 2 ELS) at the close of summer. For five weeks (July 24-August 31, 1978) Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary conducted its first Summer Quarter in Israel (SQI).

Understandably, since this was an extension of the summer study programs that have been conducted on the Mequon campus since 1972, SQI 78 was not just another Holy Land tour sponsored by a travel agent interested in making a profit. It was instead a program of graduate study combining four 5-day weeks of archaeological excavation (in cooperation with Tel Aviv University's Institute of Archaeology) plus 16 days of travel to places of significance in the Holy Land.

As part of the seminary's summer program of supplementary studies, SQI 78 offered three credits in Biblical Archaeology and four and one-half credits in Biblical Geography. The majority of participants were enrolled in the program as credit students. They wrote several examinations in Israel and were assigned to write a paper on some area of historical/geographical/archaeological inquiry and its relation to biblical studies.

The scene for the archaeological phase of SQI 78 was Tel Michal, an ancient site located on the Mediterranean coast about seven miles north of Tel Aviv, in the region known from the Scripture as the Plain of Sharon. Tel Aviv University has been conducting a comprehensive study of the pattern of settlement in this coastal area during the biblical period. The archaeological remains of the site are dispersed over five hills, the highest of which—about five acres in area—was the focal point for much of the 1978 excavation. Seven different areas of the tel were explored in the current excavations. Exploration of Tel Michal was begun in 1940; limited excavation was conducted in 1958–1961. The current project was begun in the summer of 1977, and will probably be concluded after one more summer's work.

Living conditions for the five week period were spartan but wholesome. Life in an archaeological base camp (in this case, about a mile and a half from the tel) reminded many participants of family camping. And accommodations of the five weekend excursions were usually either youth hostels (\$4 for bed and breakfast) or church-operated hospices.

SQI 78 offered unusual benefits not available to the person who joins a commercially sponsored tour. In addition to gaining firsthand experience in field archaeology, SQI participants shared in daily devotions conducted by one of the pastors or seminarians of the group. No participant will soon forget the worship service conducted in the ruins of the synagog atop the ancient Herodian fortress of Masada, or at the Garden Tomb, possible site of Christ's resurrection, or the Communion service celebrated on top of the Arbel, rocky monolith towering 1000 feet over the Sea of Galilee and overlooking the scenes of Christ's ministry. An unusual experience one weekend was a taste of life at a kibbutz. During the weekend travel staff members presented 40 mini-lectures, which related the site being visited to the biblical narrative. Topics of these lectures ranged from the geographical ("Environs of Jerusalem," "Benjamin—Wolf and Prey," "Philistia of the Philistines") to the historical ("Fortifying the Land," "Where is the King's House?"). Still other lectures supplied background information about life in ancient Canaan needed for proper and fuller understanding of the sacred narrative ("Dew in the Morning and Rain in Its Season," "Israel and the Sea," "The Ancient City").

The five weekend tours to significant geographical areas of Israel brought many biblical scenes into sharper focus for the participants. Near Jerusalem's Sheep Gate the group visited an Arab sheep and goat market. The milling of the animals and of their owners, dressed much as they were at Christ's time, the excited babbling of barter, the disappointment voiced by the goatherd who wasn't getting his price—all this recreated a scene from centuries long past and helped to bridge the gap between the past and present. Vineyards all over Israel offered reminders of details of Isaiah's Parable of the Vineyard (ch.5): the abundance of stones which had to be cleared out to prepare for planting the vineyard, the stone watchtowers built to safeguard the crop. An early morning walk down the Mount of Olives along the Kidron and around the Hinnom Valley took only an hour and a half, but even the younger members of the group admitted it was strenuous. More than one person

remarked that Christ and the disciples must have been in top physical condition to be able to be on the go almost constantly in a land that consists predominantly of hills and valleys.

An interesting two and a half hours were spent in Jerusalem one afternoon with an Israeli archaeologist who has spent the last ten years with a team excavating the area near the western wall of the ancient city. Thousands of cubic yards of debris, the legacy of nineteen centuries, have been removed in order to ascertain the original dimensions of the temple area in New Testament times. Nineteen huge courses of Herodian masonry (recognizable by the recessed margin along the edge of the stone) have been exposed, making it clear that the walls of the magnificent structure went down much deeper than the casual visitor would imagine. Looking at the exposed remains of the immense wall atop which the pinnacle of the temple once stood took one's thoughts back to the accounts of Christ's temptation. As Satan suggested, for Christ to have survived a fall from such a height might well have attracted attention—and followers.

Long forgotten history came alive for the participants in SQI 78. King Herod, e.g., did not receive the title "The Great" just for massacring infants. The man was an achiever. SQI's five days in Jerusalem provided mute evidence that Herod wanted to restore some of Jerusalem's lost grandeur. And so he rebuilt and enlarged Zerubbabel's temple, the plain-Jane structure built 500 years earlier by the returning exiles. He doubled the area of the temple platform, surrounded it with an immense retaining wall, and made the temple in Jerusalem equal in beauty to the Hellenistic temples being built throughout the Near East. In Samaria and in Caesarea Herod built impressive fortifications and temples and amphitheatres and stadiums. The man left his fingerprints and footprints all over the land, and balanced the national budget while he was doing it, too.

The sharp contrasts that the land of Israel presents impressed the participants. The smallness of the Promised Land served to magnify the Lord's promise of protection; its location (in places there are only forty miles of arable land between the sea to the west and the sea of sand to the east) reinforced one's awareness of Israel's dependence on her covenant God for the necessities of life. A tiny land sandwiched in between two powerful civilizations, one on the Nile and another along the Tigris-Euphrates, needed to be reminded constantly that her security lay not in standing armies and military muscle and astute diplomacy but in Jehovah's strong arm.

Another benefit accruing to SQI participants resulted from the fact that the Sharon Plain Project conducted by Tel Aviv University's Institute of Archaeology is not only an excavation project, but a teaching project as well. The university sponsored field trips to nearby tels and museums. Digging at Tel Michal began at 5:00 each weekday morning and ended at 1:00 each afternoon. But the day's work was not over. At 5:00 each afternoon the members of each of the seven groups of digger-students met to analyze and identify all potsherds which they had uncovered the previous day. As each of the digging groups went deeper into the earth (several excavated 20 to 30 feet in the course of four weeks) it was interesting to observe the changes in the types of pottery uncovered. At pottery analysis sessions the distinguishing characteristics of pottery from period to period were pointed out—the nuts and bolts which form the basis for ceramic chronology.

This might be the place to mention that one tangible result of SQI 78 for the seminary library is a set of ten oil lamps from each of the representative periods in the history of Palestine. These lamps, purchased by the 48 participants from a Jerusalem antiquities dealer, range from the type in use during the patriarchal period down to the type used in Palestine in the 5th Century A.D. The donors' intent is not to add interesting museum pieces to the library collection, but to provide the seminary with a visual aid illustrating how pottery can be identified from period to period and how it, in turn, can help to identify the stratum in which it is found.

After pottery analysis and the evening meal at Tel Michal, the day's activities were not over. Another facet of Tel Aviv's educational program in conjunction with its work of excavation was a series of lectures offered each week-day evening on Eastern Mediterranean archaeology. Staff members of the university's Institute of Archaeology and from participating American universities addressed the excavators on topics ranging from "The Sea Peoples" and "The Coastal Plain of Israel from the 12th Century B.C." to "Palestinian Numismatics." Much of the information they presented has never been published. After a strenuous day which had begun at 4:30, SQI participants had little difficulty adjusting to a 9:30 bedtime hour.

Most of the events recorded in Old and New Testaments took place between Dan and Beersheba, a distance of about 150 miles. The biblical history of this little land lies buried four millennia deep. At some places ancient history lies virtually on the surface; ancient potsherds littering the surface of many sites bear mute testimony to a life and a culture that ebbed and flowed there in days long past. At Tel Michal that ancient life and culture lie embedded beneath 15 to 20 strata of stone and rubble and ash. Each of these strata represents a different phase of occupation, from the time of the patriarchs to the Arabic Period eight centuries after Christ.

It will be readily apparent that since seven scattered areas of the tel were excavated during the summer of 1978, different sorts of information were unearthed from different areas. One digging group seemed to do little more for the first weeks than excavate sand, bucket after bucket. When they finally unearthed several urns containing remains of infant burial, they realized they might be working in an ancient cemetery. This was confirmed in the last week of the dig by the discovery of two adult skeletons—one female, who was buried with bracelets still around her wrist, and one male, who was buried with his weapons around his waist. As several other digging groups went deeper into the earth, they encountered a profusion of intersecting and interlocking walls. Dating these remains and plotting the course of the original walls was complicated by the fact that the tel had been subject to erosion, and that ancient wall builders had often cannibalized existing walls to procure materials for their new projects.

The major architectural find of the season was a winepress, tentatively dated to the Maccabean period (165 B.C.). As the shovels of the volunteers removed wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of debris from the area, it became clear that Tel Michal's winepress is the largest ever found in Israel, with a wine storage facility of 8000 liters.

Two years of excavation at Tel Michal have produced no clear identification with any site named in the Scripture. There is abundant evidence that the site was occupied during a large share of the biblical period, although we don't know by whom it was occupied. The name Michal is derived from the earlier Arabic name Makhmish or Makhlish, perhaps named after the god Mekal, sometimes identified with the Greek god Apollo. Although further digging will be necessary to complete the picture of Michal's history, some facts are clear. Michal's significance was toward the sea. Aerial photographs indicate some offshore harbor facility, perhaps a breakwater. Michal's existence as an ancient harbor seems confirmed by the finds of imported Greek and Cypriot pottery and metal goods. Best guess at the moment is that Michal supplied services for sea trade in the Mediterranean (one would hope that the large quantities of wine produced were not solely for local consumption), and that it may have served as a garrison and a lookout to keep tab on movements of military and naval forces in the area.

The Sharon Project sponsored by Tel Aviv University is actually a collaborative effort conducted by a consortium of Israeli and American educational institutions for two reasons: 1) to do archaeological work in the Sharon Plain, an area in which to date only a negligible amount of work has been done, and 2) to train a new generation of American archaeologists in the Israeli tradition. In contrast to the British school of archaeology, which lays great stress on digging to determine the stratification of a site, Israeli archaeologists prefer to think in terms of "total archaeology," coordinating a number of related disciplines to secure the total picture of a site. The contributing disciplines are the following four:

1. *Physical Geography*: all available information, ancient and modern, about the topography of the area is studied, its geographical features, including even soil types. An area's geography will to a considerable extent determine its history.
2. *Historical Philology*: all written records that may shed light on the site are studied, including ancient letters, government records, inscribed potsherds, even Roman road markers and, of course, Bible references.
3. *Toponymy*: the history of place names will often supply clues to identifying a modern tel with an ancient site. The Arabic names El Jib, Isdud, and Beisan, e.g., are modern counterparts to the biblical names for Gibeon, Ashdod, and Bethshean, and helped identify these sites.

4. *Field Archaeology*: the aim of archaeological inquiry dare not be simply to find ancient walls or to accumulate an impressive array of museum pieces, but must be to increase our understanding of how people lived in ancient periods.

The 1978 Michal dig began at levels of Arab occupation (8th Century A.D.), moved through Byzantine levels into the Roman period (1st Century B.C. to 3rd Century A.D., then into the Hellenistic period (beginning in the 4th Century B.C.). Shovels of the diggers probed deeper into the earth and uncovered a number of strata from the Iron Age (1200–600 B.C., the period of Israelite monarchy), although the settlement at Michal during this period seems small. The 1978 digging season came to an end as diggers in one area were reaching occupation levels dating back to the so-called Late Bronze (1550–1200 B.C.) and Middle Bronze (2000–1500 B.C.) periods.

The question which many have asked and which deserves an answer is: Was the Summer Quarter in Israel worth the time and manpower invested in it? Did it deserve to be a part of the seminary's summer quarter program of studies? This article, written only two days after returning to the States, can offer only a tentative answer to that question, and the tentative answer of only one man. Others may well have different answers.

It has been pointed out that history came alive for SQI participants. There is a great cultural gap between life in the time of Abraham or of Christ and life in the 20th Century world, a gap that separates us from people of Bible times. SQI participants were helped to penetrate those cultures to some extent, to enter imaginatively into the life and the history of the people who lived in the Holy Land centuries ago. The Messiah's statement, "My strength is dried up like a potsherd" (Ps 22:15), takes on additional meaning for the person who has perhaps handled several hundred potsherds each day (more, if he drew pottery washing detail). One who has traversed the wilderness of Judah can appreciate better the words of David: "My soul thirsteth for thee...in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is" (Ps 63:1).

The SQI curriculum laid considerable stress on biblical geography. Credit participants were expected, e.g., to be able to reconstruct the map of Palestine showing main geographical areas, watercourses, including watersheds, political regions, topographical zones, and border territories. This knowledge must inevitably enhance their appreciation and understanding of the biblical record.

In the writer's opinion, a major benefit accruing to SQI participants is a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the science of archaeology.

The weeks at Michal offered the participants clear insight into the limitations of archaeology as a scientific discipline. For one thing, only a fraction of what any ancient civilization produced escaped rot and rust and actually survives down to our day. Another serious limitation is that only a tiny fraction of what ancient cultures have produced is actually found by archaeologists, for two reasons. For one, only a small proportion of city sites in the ancient Near East have been positively identified. Then, of those that have been identified, only a small fraction have had major excavations (one Tel Aviv staff member estimated the figure at less than 2 per cent). And even when a site has a major excavation, the entire mound is not excavated; large areas of the mound remain unexplored. An impressive site the SQI group visited in northern Israel is the ancient fortress city of Hazor. Although crews of 30 archaeologists and more than 100 excavators worked for four years at Hazor, they managed to clear only 1/400 of the site. A strong impression received by SQI participants is that by its very nature archaeological exploration is fragmentary. Of necessity, archaeologists' conclusions are drawn from only a fraction of the evidence.

The fragmentary nature of archaeological effort was made quite clear on another occasion during the summer. Several SQI participants were invited to take part in a surface survey Tel Aviv University was making at Tel Poleg, a site farther north in the Sharon Plain. Purpose of the surface survey was to check for evidences of settlement. In one instance, potsherds strewn everywhere on the surface gave abundant evidence of habitation during the Early Bronze period of Palestinian history (3000–2000 B.C.).

But what if no shards had been found on the surface, as in fact was the case about a mile away? Can that be accepted as evidence that there was no Early Bronze settlement in that area? A surface survey is by its very nature fragmentary, and to build a case from lack of evidence jeopardizes the validity of the conclusions drawn.

And yet it was just such negative evidence drawn from a surface survey which was adduced by Dr. Nelson Glueck, eminent American archaeologist, as an argument against a 15th Century B.C. Israelite invasion of Canaan. Glueck's surface survey of Transjordanian sites failed to detect evidence of cities or fortifications in the regions of Edom and Moab and Ammon between 1900 and 1300 B.C. Glueck subsequently rejected the Bible chronology for the Exodus and Conquest and postulated a date about two centuries later. But could the people making the survey have missed the shards which lay just under the surface and were thus not visible at the time of survey? Or could centuries of sandstorms have covered them?

Here, surely, was a benefit of SQI 78. Participants realized that archaeology as a scientific discipline has very definite limitations. An offhand guess would be that they will be less likely to be overawed by an archaeologist's report which is hostile to a conservative interpretation of a Scripture passage.

Dr. Anson Rainey, staff member of Tel Aviv's Institute of Archaeology, illustrated another facet of archaeology which tends to make its conclusions tentative. In one of his evening lectures he defined archaeology as "the business of a human being looking at the remains of other human beings and making his subjective evaluation of it." SQI participants often witnessed how two archaeologists would evaluate the same evidence differently. It has to be of benefit to have learned at firsthand that there is often a vast difference between what an archaeologist uncovers and the conclusions he draws from his discovery. Archaeological reports have been known to confuse reporting facts with drawing conclusions.

An example may serve to illustrate the point. When archaeologists excavated Tel Beersheba in Israel's Negev in the '70's, they found a sanctuary and a horned altar, similar to the one God commanded for Israel's temple. Beersheba's sanctuary and altar date to the period of the Israelite monarchy. This is the evidence. Now what conclusions are to be drawn from this evidence? A conclusion commonly drawn in OT circles today is that the horned altar found in ancient Israel's outlying territory shows that Israel practiced polytheism as late as the monarchical period. Accordingly, the Israelites are said to have worshiped many gods at many shrines in many parts of the country. It is further alleged that Israel became a monotheistic nation only at the time of King Hezekiah, or perhaps King Josiah.

Needless to say, we will read the evidence differently. Although Israel from its very inception was monotheistic, it consistently rebelled against the regulations, including the worship regulations, of its covenant God. The horned altar at Beersheba shows that Israel also violated God's expressed will be be worshiped only at the place he would designate. The subjective nature of the archaeological enterprise was recognized by SQI participants. They will concur with Dr. William Dever, noted American archaeologist, who advises: "Never read an archaeological report as Gospel truth."

But having said that, one must in fairness present the truth on the other side. Despite the limitations under which archaeological research is carried on, Bible believing Christians can be grateful for the contributions it has made to understanding the Bible.

Archaeology has helped to fill in the historical background of the Bible. How do you explain God's thrice-repeated prohibition to ancient Israel: "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk" (Ex 23:19; 34:26; Dt 14:21)? The documents unearthed at Ugarit, on the Mediterranean coast several hundred miles north of Palestine, have given us valuable information about ancient Baal worship. Thanks to archaeologists, we now know that boiling a baby goat in his own mother's milk was part of Canaanite fertility cult ritual. At the time Israel entered the Promised Land, this was the accepted way of appealing to the god of fertility to grant his blessings. Or if when your class is studying Genesis 31 some student asks why Rachel stole her father's household gods, what would you answer? Documents which archaeologists have found at Nuzi in ancient Mesopotamia inform us that there was a close connection between possession of the family gods and the right of inheritance. With this information one begins to realize that Rachel's theft was motivated not so much by an attachment to her childhood religion as by shrewd concern that her husband secure her father's inheritance rights.

Another positive contribution archaeology has made to biblical studies is that *it has added to a fuller understanding of the original languages of the Bible.* The papyri buried for centuries in the sands of Egypt illuminate the Greek of the New Testament. On a "Wilderness Week End" the SQI group visited the Qumran

community near the west shore of the Dead Sea. The precious scrolls recovered only 30 years ago from the caves at Qumran not only illustrate some of the unusual vocabulary of St. John's Gospel and Epistles, but help us to ascertain the exact Hebrew text of Isaiah's prophecy. The more than 16,000 documents unearthed the past two years in Ebla, in Syria, will shed light on the language of the Old Testament. The language of the Ebla documents is Semitic, more particularly Northwest Semitic—the same branch of the family to which Hebrew belongs. Here again we recognize the hand of a gracious God. Through the spade of the archaeologist He has given us another body of literature closely related to Biblical Hebrew. As a result, our understanding of Hebrew vocabulary and syntax will grow.

The participants of the Summer Quarter in Israel 1978 have been helped to recognize the limitations of archaeology. But they are grateful for the contributions archaeology has made to biblical studies, and they will want to be alert for contributions it will undoubtedly continue to make.*

* The role of archaeology in Bible Study is treated in greater detail in an article in Volume 68 of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (October, 1971, pp 228ff).