



Picking up the pieces of our past

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

Moving dirt.

From the mouth of the archeologist, those words take on an enthusiastic, almost musical lilt.

"When you're moving dirt, the thrill part comes in. Someone takes a piece of pottery and says, 'You know, I'm the first person to touch this pottery since the time of Abraham.' It's a sense of reliving the past."

Dr. James Ross has felt that sensation many times. Ross, a biblical archeologist and Old Testament scholar, has "moved dirt" on numerous excavations in the Middle East.

Ross is typical in that he is not a full-time archeologist. His interest in archeology grew out of his biblical studies. A member of the United Church of Christ, he holds a doctoral degree in Old Testament studies and has taught for the past 18 years at the Episcopal-run Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Va.

Since 1960 Ross has participated in "digs" at Shechem on the West Bank of the Jordan, at Caesarea, Herod's seaport on the Mediterranean coast and at Tel Jemme.

Ross also spent more than three years teaching and doing research at the Albright Institute of Archeological Research in Jerusalem. Most recently, in 1983, he worked at Tel el-Hesi, a Bronze Age site 40 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

Digs in Israel are held only in the summer, Ross explained. Summer is the dry season and it is impossible to dig during rains. Moreover, most digs rely totally on volunteers who receive college credit for their work.

A typical dig is six to seven weeks of demanding labor.

"We live in tents with pit

toilets and outdoor showers," Ross said. "We dig from 5 o'clock in the morning until noon. Then we have a big meal and rest until 3:30, then work again until 5:30. At night there are lectures about the history, language and culture of the people."

By carefully digging and sifting through layers of dirt the archeologist comes across ancient walls, floors, cisterns, Ross noted. The most common find is broken pieces of pottery.

"Pottery is the language of archeology," said Ross. "The way we date (areas) is by different styles of pottery. The dating of Palestinian pottery is very precise," usually to within 25 years.

Sites also yield "a variety of ob-

jects that show us how people lived. You'll find awls, weaving tools, installations like hearths and ovens. The simple measurements of rooms will tell you what they were used for," Ross said.

What motivates a person to travel halfway around the world to sift through dirt under a grueling sun? Ross is driven by curiosity to understand how ancient people lived, but "it's not idle curiosity."

In a sense, Ross continued, "you can see yourself mirrored in ancient man. You can see yourself in those (Bible stories). Archeology fills in some of the details. It illuminates.

"To be able to understand the way the Bible is the word for us,

we have to know something of how it was the word for early people," he said.

But Ross said that only a "very few archeologists set out trying to 'prove that the Bible is literally true' in every historical and physical detail.

The stories in the Bible are the way Israel interpreted its past over centuries, Ross believes. "The process of passing on that information and the way generations retold it is more important than the truth or falsity of any detail in any story."

In the final analysis, said Ross, "the truth of the Bible transcends archeological research."

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

The cave that talked back

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

It would be hard to think of an archeological discovery that excited the world more than the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. They were found in caves on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.

The manner in which the scrolls came to light was enough to fire the popular imagination. As a result there are several different versions of the event. One thing is certain: The discoverer was not a professional archeologist. It was a 15-year-old Bedouin boy named Muhammed edh-Dhib ("the wolf").

One of the more likely accounts of his discovery has Muhammed roaming around the bleak area with his flock and becoming understandably annoyed when a

skittish goat ran off into a cave.

The boy threw a stone into the cave to scare the fugitive out. In the eerie stillness he heard the sound of breaking pottery. He called his companion and the two clambered up to investigate.

There they found several ancient earthen jars which seemed to be crammed with scrolls wrapped in age-darkened linen. Sensing their value, they brought the scrolls to a Moslem sheik in Bethlehem.

Thus began a fascinating cloak-and-dagger affair, with several parties conniving for possession of this extremely valuable material.

An intensive search over a decade yielded about 600 manuscripts in 11 caves in various stages of preservation. Central to the area was a ruin known as Qumran.

Excavations at Qumran unearth-

ed buildings of a religious community known as Essenes.

The buildings had been in use from about 135 B.C. to 31 B.C. and then again from 1 A.D. to 68 A.D.

When Roman armies overran the area, the Essenes fled, first carefully storing their precious literature in the caves which served as their living quarters. Apparently they figured on returning.

However, the Essenes had not reckoned on the completeness of the Roman victory. Their writings were to remain hidden for almost 19 centuries.

The scrolls made a considerable impact. They contained copies of all the books of the Hebrew Bible, except Esther. Before, our earliest Hebrew text of the Old Testament went back only to 982 A.D. Here were manuscripts a thousand