

# Images at Tel Dan

By George Tombs  
NC News Service

I could feel we were about to discover something important. Already the landscape had changed. What had been stark and dry like a desert was now a sweet grove of poplars and ash, shading us from the burning sun of the Mediterranean.

Here it was: a huge mound of earth.

There were ladders along its sides and archeologists at work.

I felt a lump in my throat as our guide said this was the ancient city of Leshem, also called Laish and later on Dan. The Canaanite people of Old Testament times lived here for more than 3,000 years. Here, the Bible tells us, King Jeroboam lifted up the golden calf and plunged his people into idolatry.

My wife and I felt lucky to be in the Holy Land. And this was one of the most exciting moments. We stood before the ruins of Tel Dan — "tel" means mound — and we felt the thrill of discovery. Here was a city mentioned in Genesis and Judges, in Kings and Joshua, a city older than almost anything we could imagine.

Something so incredibly old, yet so new — because Tel Dan has been explored by archeologists only since 1970.

Now, as the guide spoke, the doors and walls and stone road became once again a living city. We could picture how the peaceful settlement of Laish was

laid waste by the tribe of Dan.

It was well situated, just beside the Dan River, one of the four sources of the River Jordan, in a land where fresh water is coveted.

The gate on the southern rim of the mound is the largest ever discovered in Israel. That gives an idea of just how important a city it was.

I was impressed by the ruins of Tel Dan and even more impressed by the work of the archeologists.

Everywhere you go in the Holy Land, from Upper Galilee to the Red Sea, archeologists are at work at biblical sites. In fact, archeologists have almost a privileged role. They can stop modern buildings from going up long enough to move in and check the site for signs of treasure.

They can take mere chunks of stone and mortar and pottery, or weapons and bits of tile, and from that read a story of how life was a hundred generations ago, a story no one intended to tell.

Some archeological discoveries, like the Dead Sea Scrolls or part of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, have made news around the world and excited the imagination of many persons.

But what has been learned from digs like Tel Dan?

To the expert, the study of the ruins helped piece together the culture and organization of the peaceful city of Laish when the tribe of Dan entered.

The study of the mound has given experts a better grasp of when events occurred. Moreover, archeologists have gained a deeper understanding of Israelite culture itself.

Of course, from the work of archeologists in the Holy Land we have learned about New Testament times, too. Near Tel Dan is Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus said to Peter: "On this rock, I will build my church."

I suppose it's natural when you walk among ruins to imagine how life was long ago, to picture past events.

The image that kept wandering through my mind was the golden calf, that symbol of despair, of a people turning away from God. Even Aaron, Moses' brother, worshiped the calf, centuries before King Jeroboam raised it above his people.

And then prophets foretold the destruction of the city, and the reduction of its pagan sanctuary and its proud palaces to ruins.

After that, the ravages of time took over.

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years older!

Some biblical books known previously only in Greek translation were now available in their original languages. Aramaic translations of many biblical books increased our knowledge of the language Jesus spoke.

Many scrolls contained intriguing information about the life of the community which produced them. This made it possible to reconstruct more fully the thought world of an important group of Jews who flourished when Christianity was just beginning.

The Qumran discoveries, spectacular though they were, are just one instance of the many archeological finds that have contributed to deeper understanding of the Bible in modern times.

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# FOOD...

...for thought

St. Paul is one of the more unforgettable people met in Scripture. The story of his conversion, in which he is blinded by faith's light, is fascinating.

Without a doubt, the discovery of more information about him, more details of the years he spent on the road forming the earliest Christian communities, would be considered a great find. Why?

Well, there is a human tendency to be fascinated by the past. By digging into the past, the archeologist and the historian have unearthed enough treasures to line the halls of many great museums: ancient sculpture, books, coins, maps, furniture, clothing.

When an exhibit on the times of Alexander the Great toured great museums in a number of large cities recently, thousands of people waited patiently in long lines for the opportunity to view it.

Perhaps this fascination reflects humanity's need to establish and maintain connections with its roots. Is there a sort of collective hope that important facts about humanity's roots won't be lost, won't be forgotten forever?

But again, why?

Do we dig into the past with more than the hope that new museum pieces will be found? Are people satisfied by the mere opportunity to "view" their

past? Or is there more to it than that?

The Christian community takes great interest in its past, its origins. But it does not tend to approach this as a matter of interest only for museum curators. Take Scripture, for example.

Few Christians approach Scripture as a scrapbook that only reminds them what things used to be like. Instead, Christians look to Scripture as a word to proclaim now, which is exactly what they do with it each Sunday during the Mass.

Scripture represents much more to Christians than a powerful memory. It is believed to have power to form people now.

But then why do Christians take an interest in the work of archeologists? Why are Christians fascinated by the opportunity for a fuller view of life among the first followers of Jesus?

In part, of course, because it is interesting and valuable to know about the past for its own sake. But there is more.

Christians hope that a view of the past will renew their vision of what Scripture can mean now. Christians sense that by penetrating their past, they will also be helped to penetrate the meaning of their lives now.

Isn't it a sense that our past is worth knowing because somehow it is life-giving?

...for discussion

1. Is there a story out of your family's history that still means a lot to you because it is in some way a reminder of what you consider most important in life or of how much others in your life mean to you? What do you think you learn — what do you discover — from your own history and the history of your family?

2. An archeologist or a historian can help the human family rediscover some of its past. But do you think this work can illuminate the human family's big questions today or contribute to our future? Why?

3. Why do you think the church's memory of its earliest days nearly 2,000 years ago is important?

## SECOND HELPINGS

"Prayer Pilgrimage Through Scripture" by School Sister of Notre Dame Rea McDonnell. In Scripture people recognize that "biblical people are above all community people, those who can recognize God at work not only in their individual lives but also in their community life," writes Sister McDonnell. "Our God is one who wants to be known" and so he reveals himself in the prophets, the psalmists, in the stories of Adam and Abraham, through wrestling with Jacob and arguing with Moses, in our prayers and through our history. In all these ways, God "still reaches out to lure his people into union with him," the author says. Each chapter in this book contains a short tour through biblical history along with exercises to help connect the biblical message to the modern world. (Paulist Press, 545 Island Rd., Ramsey, N.J. 07446. \$6.95.)