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Digging

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(Books & Music store) and say, 'Hey this is a great story. Maybe it is historical; maybe it isn't.' You go at it yourself and figure if it was meant literally or not.

"I think," he continued, "it is much wiser to say archaeology gives us a much more accurate and realistic picture of the biblical world in which Bible accounts were written."

H. Darrell Lance of Rochester, former professor of Old Testament interpretation at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, understands that line of thinking.

"The tendency to connect specific excavation finds to the Bible is at its lowest ebb ever," Lance said. But he added, "The pendulum will swing back."

Beliefs about the patriarchs offer a good example, he said. At one time the noted professor William Albright argued they were quite historical, based on archaeological findings of ancient customs. But along came others who said the parallels were overdrawn and that the patriarchal period was pure mythology, he said.

Thus while archaeology sheds new light on the Scriptures, it also taketh away.

"It depends on your judgement," Lance said.

Lance and other local biblical professors speak from experience, having immersed themselves in archaeological digs. From 1964 to 1971 Lance was associate director of the Hebrew Union College-Harvard Semitic Museum dig at Gezer. Gezer is mentioned in the Old Testament account (I Kings 9:15), which tells of King Solomon fortifying his kingdom, particularly in the cities of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer. And nowadays, some 3,000 years later, some of those stone walls can be seen, complete with chambers, which are assumedly guards' rooms. Whether all the walls were from the same Solomonic period, however, is debated.

Archaeology aficionados such as Father Daniel Casey Jr., a doctoral student at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, are attempting to help answer such questions. Now in the Middle East for a pilgrimage and to teach at the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies, Father Casey dug near the fortifications at Megiddo in the summer of 1994. His job was to help verify pottery records from Megiddo's multi-layered and stormy past. (Since then he occasionally sports a T-shirt proclaiming, "I survived Armageddon." Armageddon in Rev. 16:16, he explains, is a corruption of the Hebrew "Har Megiddo," or the Mount of Megiddo.)

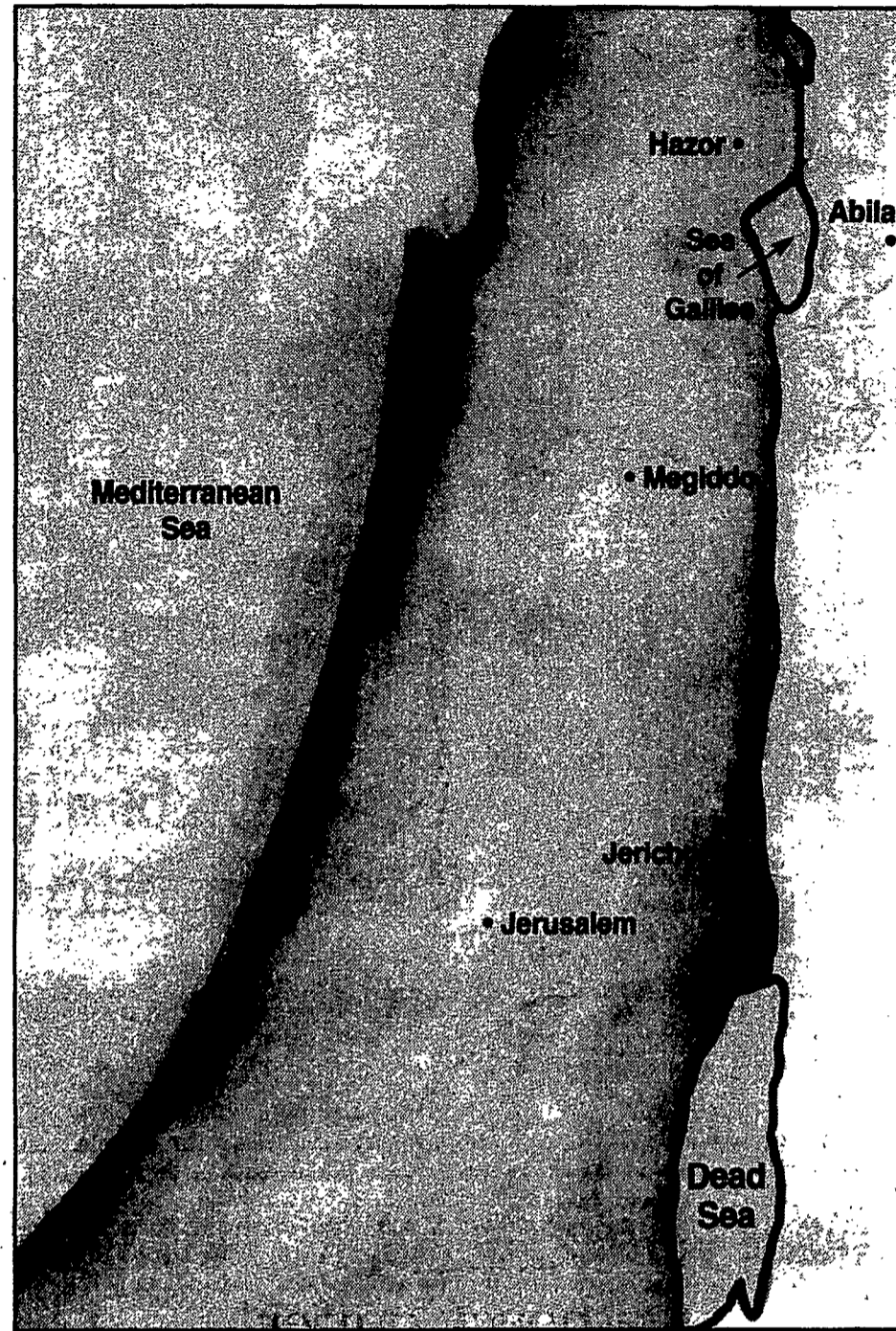
To actually see what he believes were Solomon's walls was a "marvelous illumination," he said. "They're there."

But he admits, "Every artifact, every stone, every layer is controversial in Megiddo." And that is one good reason that, as he often quips, "Archaeology should not form faith, but it can inform faith."

"Some people want to say, 'There's no archaeological evidence of Abraham, ok, there was no Abraham.'" Father Casey continued "They throw the baby out with the bath water. But most people are maximalists around here and say, 'If we have archaeological evidence, fine. If not, we're still going to believe.' They don't need archaeology to prove their faith."

According to Father John R. Lee, CSB, an anthropology professor at St. John Fisher College, "It has been an ongoing controversy for the last 10 years about what is the place of archaeology in biblical studies."

First, Father Lee said, "Looking for biblical events in the ground is very bad archaeology. ... If you're only interested in one period, you're destroying everything on top and may go right through the biblical site, destroying everything



there. No reputable archaeologist will engage in it.

"You can't take the Bible in one hand and a shovel in the other," he continued, "saying here we find this and and we find that mentioned in the Bible. You do your digging, analyze the material and then look in the Bible and say it fits — not the other way around."

Father Lee has dug at about 15 sites in the Middle East since 1966, an avocation he claims has added 10 years to his life as well as deepened his appreciation of ecumenism — he has had as roommates professors from Cincinnati Bible Seminary and Calvin College. This summer Father Lee, having dug at Gezer among other sites, will return to Abila in northern Jordan. It is a place he believes Jesus visited (Mt 8:28) and where the early apostles evangelized.

He has excavated in Abila's bath complex and theater area.

"We haven't found any cross or religious medal, any kind of religious indicator," Father Lee said. "But it kind of fills out a milieu. You can see how they lived. ... They were much more sophisticated than we give them credit for, given the technically excellent architecture, the water systems, the underground water channels, the system drains, the blocks of stone. The apostles weren't always talking to farmers in out-of-the-way places, but were standing up in the theaters giving a homily."

Father Lee said he and other archaeologists are "always trying to people the area in our imagination."

Capturing many different imaginations lately are excavations that challenge the fall of Jericho. For one thing, Jericho was at three different locations, according to Father Lee. The more ancient site remains a problem, he said, because it fails to show any occupation during the period described in the Bible. The Israelites would hardly have had to quietly circle the city, sound the trumpets, and slaughter the masses.

was that the Israelites realized God was with them, that they were God's chosen people through no virtue of their own.

Such objective Old Testament study by Catholics is apparently not common.

"I wish we had more Catholic readers," commented Jack Meinhardt, associate editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. "I think a good majority are Protestant. It seems that Catholics tend to stress church history, not biblical history."

Meinhardt cited as a possible factor for this lack of interest the "suppression theory" that the New Testament replaced the Old Testament.

At St. Bernard's Institute, Devadasan Premnath, registrar and adjunct assistant professor, finds that many Catholic students arrive with "baggage" about the Old Testament, thus his preference for the term, "Hebrew Scriptures" or "Hebrew Bible." He finds students striving to validate the Hebrew writings through later stories of Christ. But they weren't written to predict Christ's coming, he said, noting, "This is a large barrier one needs to get through."

Students fail to see the stories as records of faith journeys by their creators, he said. "They didn't write them down hoping they would be canonized at some point," he remarked.

Archaeology can shed light on those faith journeys, Premnath said, confessing a keen interest in it. It also helped to support his Ph.D. dissertation on eighth century oracles — Amos, Isaiah, Hosea and Micah.

"Everyone knows their message was clear, that they were critical of unjust practices," he said. But just what led to those practices was not as clear.

Using archaeological and other information, Premnath showed that peasants were forced to produce cash crops for olive oil and wine, which also meant that they had to buy their own staples. Staples came to be in short supply, and the merchants began to cheat people, using false measures and rigged scales in the marketplace. Widespread olive presses and wine vats discovered in archaeological digs, as well as potsherd receipts for taxes paid to royal officials, supported socioeconomic theories.

Why bother with the Old Testament? Premnath devotes segments of his courses to that question. It provides a cultural background that is vital to understanding the New Testament, he said. "You don't use it as a book of morals, as a compendium of do's and don't's."

Rather, we are drawn into biblical characters' struggles, he said. "And I find it much more exciting and meaningful to be drawn in rather than to look for easy solutions. To me, that is a tremendous source of strength for us."

By recovering the important dimensions archaeology can contribute, he said, "We begin to see these people as flesh and blood."

This is one of the issues taken up at the Church of the Assumption in Fairport, by Sheryl Zabel's adult Bible class. Zabel, the parish's pastoral associate, believes it is important to share articles from magazines such as *Biblical Archaeology Review*, a popular 20-year-old publication with about 250,000 readers.

"Archaeology helps in some ways to make these stories more real," she said, noting there was even a time "when Jericho was considered to be a fairy tale. And then they found it."

Questions have been raised whether Joshua's conquest of Canaan could have happened as dramatically as written in the Bible; or whether it could have been a slow infiltration of people from Hittite country, the south, and the east; or a peasant revolt; or whether it has another explanation.

The point of the Jericho story, no matter what actually took place, Zabel said,

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