

LANDMARKS IN THE CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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Petre Semen, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate* (Iași: Trinitas, 2008), 278p.

Studying the Holy Books of the Old Testament implies a voyage in the past. Essentially, there are two ways through which we can go from the 21st century backwards, to the world in which the holy books had been written. One of them is to be found in the Old Testament, together with other ancient writings which were preserved from ancient times till nowadays. Through the simple reading of the holy books, we can regain something from the history and civilization of the initial places. But no matter how valuable this approach might be, it is limited, because the writers of the Old Testament referred less to the historical and cultural conditions of the times they lived in, their main aim being that of discovering the holy will of God regarding the people of Israel and the whole world. The second way of travelling back for the biblical world is offered by archaeology and implies the systematic recovery of the proofs that can be found regarding the disappeared civilizations and societies and the attentive examination of these recovered proofs, in the attempt to rebuild something from the character of these worlds.

In many parts of the world, the archaeological work implies diggings. These diggings represent the initial part of the archeological work; after that, the classification, study and interpretation of the discovered proofs make possible the gradual reconstitution of the ancient societies. By doing so, we can obtain a more complete image of the life in the ancient world than that which is formed in a written text. For a better understanding of the environment in which the history of the Old Testament takes place, we must take in account the information offered by the archeologists. In the XXth century the archaeological proofs have become so important for the study of the Old Testament, that some general information referring to the biblical archeology is useful to any reader.

The universal impulse which gave birth to the exploring of the Middle East had a special interest for the way in which the majority of the events told in the Holy Bible took place. The term “biblical archeology” should be understood and interpreted in a large sense. In geographical terms, biblical archeology is limited to those areas in which

biblical narrations take place and to the neighboring regions that had an influence on the history of those areas.

The term “biblical archeology” can be used in a responsible way only if we are fully aware of the history and its implications, and in the same time if we try to find out something more about the world in which the Old Testament was written.

The archaeological work has become a relatively exact science in the same time with the new methods of investigation. As a result of the diggings and of the archaeological discoveries, our knowledge about the biblical world is considerably more extensive than it was a century ago, so that large areas from the history and civilization of the ancient world we knew nothing about until recently is completed now with specifically interesting information. Surely, there is still very much work to do, but the biblical archeology has progressed enormously in the last thirty years.

Regardless of the historical truth found in the different literary genres of the Old Testament writings, it is obvious that the data need a critical interpretation before they can be used by the historian who deals with the old Israel. The Holy Scripture cannot be read just like a simple historical document. Generally speaking, the authors of the Old Testament books were very selective regarding the content of their works. So they do not simply tell us things which we would like to know. The Holy Scripture does not contain a true historiography in the modern sense of the word: the word “history” does not even appear in the Hebrew Bible. For example, the biblical authors from the 8th century B.C. depict on a large scale the dramatically public actions of the great kings, priests, reformers and prophets, but tell us nearly nothing about the everyday life of the Israelites. We can only find some hints in the Holy Bible regarding the people's look, their clothes or feeding, as well as what usually happened in the streets or markets of the ordinary town or about the way in which they practiced agriculture, or trade, in what way they wrote or kept documents, how they had fun, how long they lived, what diseases they died of and how they were buried. Precisely these are the details that the biblical archeology places at our disposal.

Even if archaeology cannot confirm each time the fundamental religious meaning of the Holy Bible, it still succeeds in clarifying the historical circumstances of numerous biblical texts and the events they describe. Sometimes the archeology can bring foremost certain problems the biblical authors didn't insist on very much from different reasons. Although this supplementary or compensatory aspect of the biblical archeology is often neglected, in reality it represents a specific significance due to its explaining function of

the biblical texts.

So the main contribution of biblical archeology to a correct understanding of the Old Testament consists in the fact that it helps to reconstruct the initial frame of the Holy Bible, bringing new information about the peoples, places and forgotten cultures of the Old Middle East - a world lost in the darkness of time in which Israel has its origins and where its literature gained form and sense. The Holy Bible is not, consequently, an isolated vestige of antiquity, of an unknown origin and without credibility. Archeology seems that it could not demonstrate the pure historical existence of some personalities from the Old Testament such as Abraham or Moses, but it invalidated forever the theory according to which the Holy Bible is pure mythology. The Bible speaks about a real people in flesh and blood, existing in a specific place and time, whose historical experience led irrevocably to a conception on the condition and human destiny that transcended all the ancient conceptions.

Therefore, biblical archaeology, as a historical discipline, disposes of unique necessary means in order to respond to questions like: What happened in fact? When did it happen? Who were the main participants? How did it happen? Here ends in fact the domain of the archeological research. The biblical archeology cannot and does not intend to answer the question: Why? The answer to this question is in the care of the creed.

The work of Father Petre Semen entitled "The Biblical Archeology in Present Times", comes to help both students in Theology, as well as all those who wish to understand more of the "Promised Land" and implicitly, of the Holy Bible. This manual is made up of 27 lectures elaborated at the highest academic level, having a rich and up-to-date bibliography. Within these lectures, you will find a historical presentation of the events in the life of Israel, their connection with the historical narratives of the Scripture, as well as their interpretation in the spirit of the holy books and the monotheist creed. Regarding the way of presenting these lectures, we can divide them into four chapters: the first explains some technical terms, the second presents the geographical position, the climate and the inhabitants, the third contains information regarding all that represents the domestic, social and lawful institutions, and the fourth shows us the organization and the leading ways, as well as the Mosaic and penal law. In the following we will briefly present the proposed topics included in this volume, allowing those interested in to discover the importance of these lectures from their minute approach, by themselves.

The first proposed structure presents some introductory notions of Biblical

Archeology. Here the definition of archeology is given, its division is made and the necessity of its study in the light of the study of the Old Testament is shown. When ending this first topic, Father Semen shows that the most correct definition that should be given to this discipline should be: the archeology of Palestine and the neighboring countries in the biblical period. Later on he passes to certain chronological reference points, where he places at disposal some sources, concerns and stages of archeology and, in the end, a dating of the main discovered archeological object is done. Afterwards, the author inserts a presentation of the archeological discoveries from the neighboring countries of Palestine: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Syria, also presenting the use of these discoveries for biblical archaeology. The geography of the Holy Land; the climate, flora and fauna are two lectures that couldn't have been absent from this manual. All these are necessary in order to define the place where the important events mentioned in the Bible took place. The next lectures, having the same aim are the ones that present the Administrative and Territorial Division of the Holy Land with the more important places of safety, the inhabitants of the Holy Land as well as the neighboring peoples of the Holy Land. These peoples have influenced the Jewish people in different ways so that they are of a special importance for the biblical archaeology. The third part is reserved to the Household and Social Institutions. Here the way of building houses is presented, as well as the clothing, the way of obtaining food, the occupations. An important topic is that of the family, the social position of women, the raising of children, and the way of struggling against immorality through the Mosaic law. Connected to the social institution, Sciences, arts, and the calendar are presented, as well as the death theme and the funerary rituals. The last section of the book inserts information on administration and organizing forms; Mosaic Law problems, and those regarding the Penal Law; the Religious institutions, the Cult places, the priests, ordinary and extraordinary cult actions, symbolism and typical character of sacrifices, holy actions, the daily Divine cult, the sabbatical holidays and other Israelite holidays are approached. In the end of this chapter the groups and parties of political and religious character are presented.

This work is valuable not only for the fact that it helps to understand the social, economic and cultural context in which the writings of the Old Testament appeared, but especially because it brings up to date the news in this domain. We recommend this textbook to all those interested in rediscovering the original framework of the Holy Bible, which will later allow a correct understanding of the Old Testament.