

A Temple Full of Questions

Year after year, they go to Israel for several weeks to unveil a new bit of history going back thousands of years. The latest excavation site in which the team of Associate Professor Filip Čapek from the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University participated was the Tel Moca site with the remains of a unique temple complex.

STORY BY Kamila Kohoutová PHOTO BY René Volfík

There was fantastic news making front pages in the media that your team was able to find the remains of Solomon's Temple. Is it true?

The basic architectural layout of the complex in Tel Moca near Jerusalem corresponds to the biblical description of Solomon's Temple. But we can't say "this is it": it's not that simple. From the Bible we know what it should look like, but a building similar to that of the biblical description in the First Book of Kings has never been found. In Judea, temples and shrines from the Iron Age have been preserved, but they are very diverse in architectural form. Tel Moca is the only temple of the megaron type (originally a simple hall with a rectangular ground plan with one entrance in one of the shorter walls), and besides the above-mentioned literary description which is from a very late period, it has no counterpart in the region. I have to make it clear that it was not us who made the discovery: that was the work of a previous expedition in 2012–2013. Our team is involved in further uncovering and revealing construction phases that preceded the temple itself.

If it turned out that the building in Tel Moca was indeed Solomon's Temple, would that mean that the city of Jerusalem was originally located elsewhere?

That was kind of a provocative idea put forward by my colleague Shua Kisilevich of the University of Tel Aviv, who is conducting our research together with Professor Oded Lipschits. The discovered settlement in Tel Moca is much older than Jerusalem: it is a locality in the fertile Sorek Valley with

plenty of water for farming, especially for growing grain. On the other hand, the original Jerusalem is on the border of the rainfall gradient just before the Judean Desert in less accessible terrain. Maybe that's why this place became a well-fortified Canaan city-state in the Bronze Age in the first place and then the capital of the Kingdom of Judah. Tel Moca could have served as an administrative centre for Jerusalem. Here, agricultural production for the capital could have been collected. In the immediate vicinity of our excavations, there was one of the largest Neolithic settlements in Israel, with an estimated population of about four thousand people. Whether there was a closer link between Tel Moca and Jerusalem still needs to be clarified. One thing is certain, though: if nothing else, the presence of the temple confirms the importance of this site.

Is there a mention of this place in the Bible?

Although the settlement in Tel Moca is large indeed and the local temple is impressive, the Bible provides only a single lead: The Book of Joshua says that it was the city of the tribe of Benjamin. Some researchers have tried to identify the locality as a place in the Bible called Obed-Edom. The story of the pilgrimage of the Ark of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments tells us that the Israelites took it to battle against the Philistines (a non-Semitic ethnic group, one of the main enemies of Biblical Israel) to help them win. But they were defeated. The narrative then describes in detail the long journey of the Ark from Ashdod to Beth-Shemesh and further through Kiriyyat-Yearim and Obed-Edom to Jerusalem.

Why could Tel Moca be the Biblical Obed-Edom?

From a geographical point of view, it makes sense. Tel Moca is located on the road from Kiriyyat-Yearim to Jerusalem. But so far it is only speculation that needs to be supported by evidence. There are more places associated with Tel Moca. I believe that this site had been intentionally neglected by the authors of the Biblical text. This could be related to Hezekiah's centralization of the cult at the end of the eighth century BC, or to the reforms of Josiah (Editor's note: the king who tried to remove all pagan cults in favour of Yahweh's) a hundred years later. It can be assumed that some places had been deliberately omitted or renamed to destroy all memories of places where temples or shrines once stood.

Because people followed all sorts of cults in them? In the temple complex of Tel Moca unique items were found from a period that we cannot associate with pure monotheism, correct?

That's right. Several statuettes were discovered in 2012 and 2013 in the courtyard of the temple. Among them is a statuette of a horse – it originally also featured a rider, but we are left with only the remains of his feet. Also, an impressive censer (although broken) weighing approximately twelve kilograms was uncovered. Nowhere else have such cultural objects been found. This means that the

image of cults varied within the Kingdom of Judea depending on local traditions. It is no coincidence that the Biblical texts often take note of the varied religious practices across Israel and criticize them.

Can we tell from the findings which religion was practiced in the temple, or which peoples worshiped their gods there?

Until the sixth century BC, cults were undoubtedly very diverse. Temples and shrines initially served various deities. The diverse anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations of various deities coexisted alongside the increasingly dominant Yahwism, which was to become the official religion. The manifestations of personal devotion and domestic rituals often differed significantly from Yahwism. The statuettes that were discovered in Tel Moca show an interesting resemblance to Philistine cult objects and iconography. They show us that, despite the Biblical interpretation, the Judaic and Philistine cultures were relatively close to each other. Perhaps that is why the Philistines are so often the target of many Old Testament stories.

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Professor Martin Prudký of the Department of Old Testament Studies during archaeological research (Photo by David Rafael Moulis)



Anthropomorphic statuettes found in the remains of the temple complex (Photo by Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority)

The Bible, however, denies such a close relationship.

On the other hand, ongoing archaeological research is increasingly confirming this cultural link. For example, Philistine ceramics, which we found in Jerusalem in the middle of the City of David in previous research in 2017, were initially considered to be imported. However, as became clear based on subsequent research, the pots were made in one of the many potteries in Jerusalem. Petrographic analysis also confirmed that the material is of local origin, not imported. The Philistines therefore had their pottery workshops in Jerusalem, or it may have been the production of local Jewish potters who adopted the practice from their Philistine neighbours. However, this phenomenon is not unidirectional, even in the Philistine material culture, especially ceramics, late-Canaan and early Judaic influences can be traced. We do not learn much about such affinity, the division of labour or trade, but also some religious traditions between the Israelites and the Philistines from the Bible. The explanation is related to the later deliberate self-delineation of specific ethnic entities, which portray the others in strong contrast.

Are you implying that the religious life of Biblical Israelites was different from what is written in the Old Testament?

It was definitely more diverse. According to the Bible, everything was centred around Jerusalem and sacrifice in the Temple. In fact, dozens of small local and rural shrines played a large role. The cult was also practiced within a household or a family. For example, statuettes with prominent female features indicating fertility had a special place in the religion of Israel. They were objects of devotion for centuries until the beginning of the sixth century BC, when monotheism began to be purposefully promoted as a comprehensive response to the

disaster of the destruction of the First Temple and Jerusalem in 586 BC. Based on this tragedy, Israel was religiously thematised in the Old Testament as an eternal community of those who were to serve one God but repeatedly failed to do so. Between the lines, Biblical texts consistently describe how reality was meant to look, which implies that this is a retrospective view.

Can you give us a specific example of such an interpretation?

Consider King Solomon. He is first described as a pious sovereign. Later, however, we learn that he had many wives and mistresses who led him astray. Then he had a revelation that his kingdom would disintegrate because of its deviation from Yahwism. The Biblical text is used as an instrument that says: whoever follows the rules will end up well, or at least will not be forgotten if they are able to review their actions and see their failings. The context of these rules is defined religiously, by the belief in one God, which, in the era of Solomon (rather a fictional than a real figure of the 10th century BC) did not seem to be practiced.

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Why do the biblical texts try to conceal reality and offer only its idealized form?

The longer I read Biblical texts, the more I realize how they are not only brilliantly written, but above all composed into great narrative units. In them,

what seems to be hidden strangely meets with what is supposed to be a role model. This also determines their educational goal and task for the reader: to recognize that the good is usually given in the form of an ideal from which one is usually far, far away, while a mistake, expressed not only in religious but also ethical and social contexts, is a daily routine. Thus the chosen historical background reveals who is human and who is God.

How does Biblical archaeology cope with often amending the images described in the Bible?

Biblical archaeology originated in the 19th century. Our discipline originally established itself as an endeavour to confirm the Biblical message. Many of the first archaeologists, historians and ancient text experts were also theologians and priests who, with good intent and admirable personal commitment, wanted to shed more light on the so-called Biblical or Israeli times. Fortunately, these labels have been dropped because they also carry undesirable political undertones. However, various archaeological findings now show us that not everything in the Bible is historically provable. And it never was the goal, because the texts are mainly a theological message from a specific time for a particular community. This understanding first came to European and American researchers, and later also to Israeli archaeologists, who had a different mission in the first two generations than to challenge the territorial and historical claims of the modern state of Israel. We had to learn to read the Bible critically and admit that it was written with a certain purpose. Biblical archaeology or however else we call it, is also and above all one of the specialized sub-divisions of archaeology.

In your work, you actually relativize the Biblical message. Isn't that undesirable for someone who works at a theological faculty?

Quite the opposite: the cooperation of theologians, historians and archaeologists is very important. We can complement one another very well. Thanks to archaeology, we can imagine the lives of people who wrote the Bible much more specifically, and the findings provide important information about their religious beliefs. Of course, we work with hypotheses and theories that either prove themselves over time and are further developed, or are rejected as misleading.

Working on excavations in Israel offers students of the Protestant Theological Faculty a unique professional opportunity. How did you manage to start this programme?

I have always wanted to participate in the excavations in Israel, because a good knowledge of the archaeological context is essential for studying ancient texts. When I studied in Heidelberg in the 1990s, I had the opportunity to travel to Jordan

with Professor Weippert, whose lectures I attended, but I did not have the resources for such an expensive trip. At that time, I made the point that if I could go to Israel to do archaeological research in the future, I would try to involve students. Thanks to Professor Oeming, also from Heidelberg, my wish came true. I could take part in the excavations in the Ramat Rachel area and eventually in other places. Finally, this year, we made it to Tel Moca, which is an ideal place for practicing research skills.



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