

KHIRBET NISYA 1979-1986: A REPORT ON SIX SEASONS OF EXCAVATION

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Problem. This project was an investigation of Khirbet Nisya (near Ramallah/El-Bireh) for six seasons to describe and interpret the excavation evidence. The excavation and analyses of finds were correlated with biblical data to help clarify certain problems relating to the Israelite settlement in the hill country of Palestine.

Method. Preliminary studies in the literature were made to determine the proper biblical, geographical, and topographical relationships of the traditional sites for both Bethel and Ai at Beitin and Et-Tell. The archaeological results from both sites were reviewed as to their fit with the biblical data. Patristic evidence was also considered in determining the location of both biblical Bethel and Ai.

When new sites seemed advisable, a site for Bethel was sought in El-Bireh, ten miles north of Jerusalem. Excavation was impossible in this thriving, modern city; thus a site for Ai was sought beyond Et-Tawil, the large mountain east of El-Bireh. After locating an ancient ruin, six seasons of excavations (1979-1986) were conducted at this site, Khirbet Nisya.

Results. The literature seemed to indicate that the traditional sites of both Bethel and Ai have been wrongly located. Thus, the archaeological results, when applied to the Bible, are misleading. Although the archaeological results fit the biblical data fairly well at Beitin (traditional Bethel), the two are incompatible at Et-Tell (traditional Ai). The intimation is that Bethel and Ai are "twin cities" in the Bible. Thus, if one is wrongly located, the other must be also.

New locations were suggested for Bethel at El-Bireh and for Ai at Khirbet Nisya. The topography, geographical relationships, and patristic evidence all fit at the new locations. Six seasons of excavations and surveys show the following periods present at Khirbet Nisya: Early Bronze (?), Middle Bronze I (?) and II, Late Bronze I, Iron Age I and II, Persian, Hellenistic, Early Roman, Early and Late Byzantine, Umayyad, and Ayyubid/Mamluk/Ottoman. The archaeological profile of the site seems compatible with the situation for biblical Ai.

Conclusion. Khirbet Nisya seems to have been an agricultural village or hamlet in most periods. Although, on the basis of the evidence from six seasons of excavation, no claim can be made that it is Ai, it does not seem necessary yet to rule it out, either.