

Heshbon — A Case of Biblical Confirmation or Confutation?

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29

Archaeology has done much in this century to make the Bible once more a trustworthy source for the reconstruction of ancient history. Bygone scholars doubted the existence of Belshazzar, the Babylonian king mentioned several times in Daniel 5 — until archaeologists discovered numerous contemporary cuneiform documents that make his place in history secure. Historians once questioned the reality of any such people as the Hittites (often mentioned in Scripture) — until archaeology provided abundant attestation not only that they were present in the ancient world but that they had an empire whose might even Egypt could not conquer. Example after example demonstrates how “archaeology has silenced the critics,” to use a familiar phrase.

Throughout Seventh-day Adventist history, evangelists, pastors, and teachers have made liberal use of the data of archaeology to confirm a conservative interpretation of the Bible. It was natural, then, that Adventists should become interested not only in borrowing the results of other archaeologists but also in achieving some of their own results through actual fieldwork. That Adventists have been able to muster enough funds and technical knowhow to mount a full-scale excavation of a major Palestinian *tell* (a hill built up artificially through successive settlement) is due almost solely to the vision and determination of Siegfried H. Horn, of Andrews University. It was my privilege to be associated with the project, in both its first and second seasons (the summers of 1968 and 1971).

The site chosen for the dig was Tell Hesban, an ancient mound of about fifty acres lying at the edge of the rolling Moabite plain, forty-five miles

due east of Jerusalem and sixteen road miles southwest of Amman. Because of its location and name, Tell Hesban has long been identified with biblical Heshbon. But why was this site chosen from among the scores of biblical sites yet undug? There were several factors, naturally, but it would be fair to say that of utmost importance among them was the hope that the findings would throw light on the vexing question of the date of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and entrance to Canaan.

I

THE PROBLEM. Almost without exception, among those who make an honest endeavor to treat the biblical data positively, modern scholars place these formative events in Israel's history in the latter half of the thirteenth century B.C.¹ — despite the Bible's own chronological statements fixing them two hundred years earlier.² The reason for this (among other cogent reasons) is that an intensive surface survey of Transjordan between 1930 and 1940 (by the late archaeologist Nelson Glueck) yielded evidence that the ancient kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom within this territory were not founded or indeed even inhabited before the thirteenth century B.C.³ How then could the events of Numbers 21, including the taking of Heshbon from King Sihon, have transpired before this date? The only way to solve the problem of Heshbon's age, therefore, was to find the site of Heshbon and by excavation see how far back its history could be traced.

THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE. What do literary sources say about the history of Heshbon?⁴ The earliest reference is in Numbers 21. From this account and the ballad imbedded in it⁵ one can conclude that unless Sihon founded Heshbon it was a Moabite city before it became the capital of the Amorites. In any case, the specific information is that Israel took Heshbon from the Amorites and resettled it at the time of that conquest. Though Heshbon appears to have been assigned to the tribe of Reuben at first, subsequently it became Gad's, and then Levi's.⁶ Many references indicate that David and Solomon controlled this territory,⁷ though Heshbon itself is not mentioned except in a Song of Songs passage (7:4 RSV) in which Solomon praises his Shulammitte: "Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bathrabbim." It is probable that Heshbon reverted to the Moabites and finally the Ammonites by the eighth-sixth centuries B.C., since it figures prominently in the oracles of Isaiah and Jeremiah against these nations.⁸ Although the Bible furnishes no further evidence, the city's history can be traced through Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine times in references by such ancient historians as Josephus, Ptolemy, and Eusebius. After the seventh century A.D. the

name Eshbus (as Heshbon was then called) disappears from the literary sources, reappearing only in the Middle Ages in its Arabic form *Hesban*.

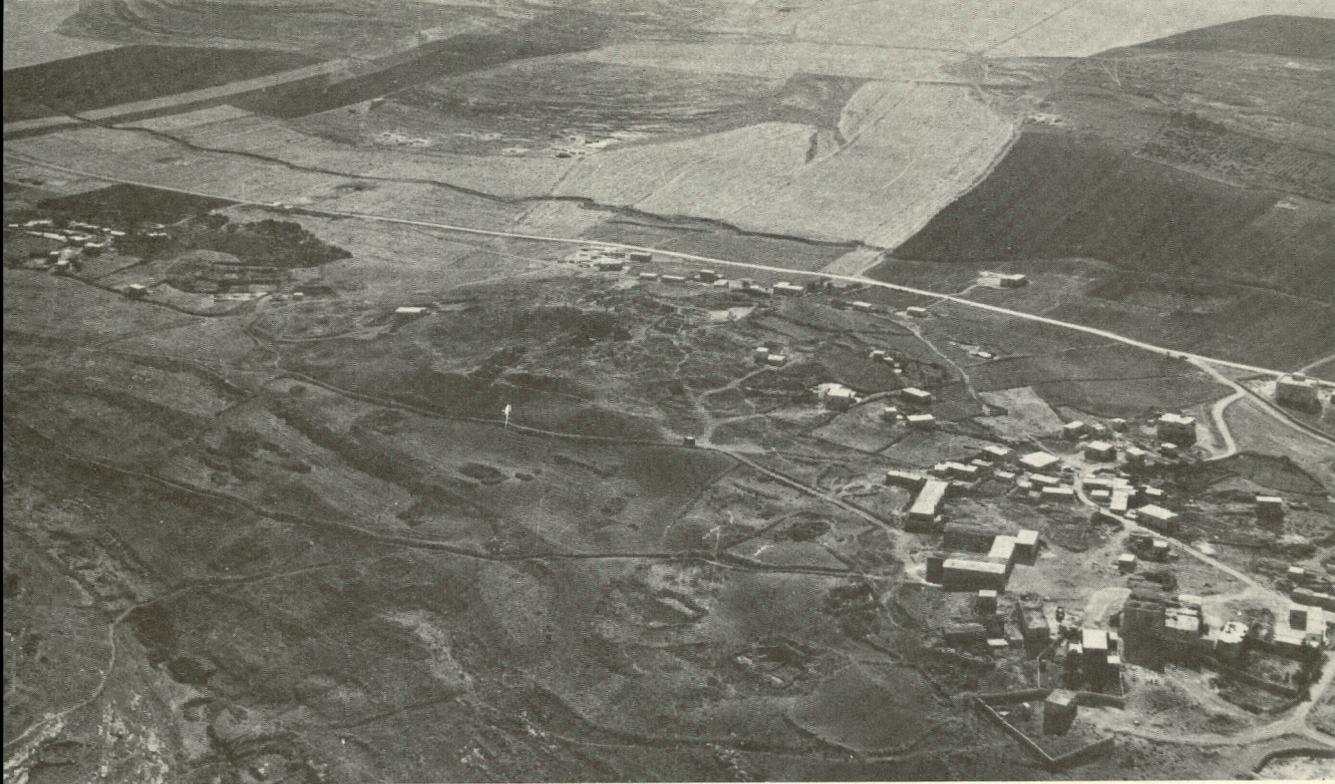
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE. An international ecumenical staff of about fifty persons, augmented by approximately 150 local workmen, set to work in 1968, and returned in 1971, to provide as much information as possible about Tell Hesban's archaeological history.⁹ In summary, the excavation of four areas on or about the acropolis, plus the ancient cemetery, exposed extensive remains of the late Arabic period, thus confirming what literary sources from the twelfth-fourteenth centuries A.D. seem to indicate. Prominent among these remains were two well-preserved rooms (one with a collapsed vaulted roof), a kiln, an elaborate courtyard drainage system, and a number of associated cisterns — most of which were probably reused from an earlier period.

31

Abundant evidence of the site's importance in the Byzantine period was provided by tombs and many remnants of once-impressive architecture, not the least of which, crowning the acropolis, was a large church complex replete with several mosaic-patterned floors in various successive phases.

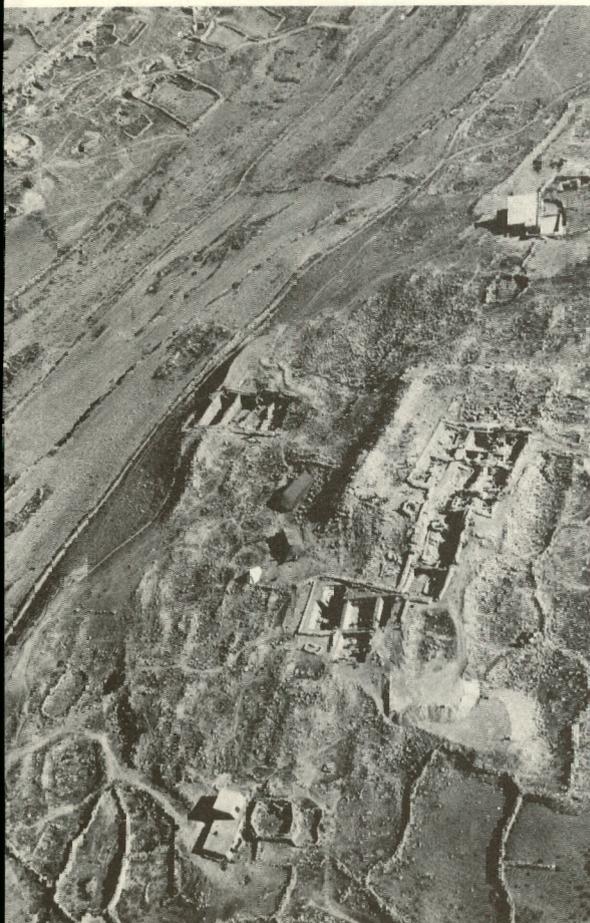
Several major walls (their foundations dug down to bedrock) testify to their defense nature in the Roman period. It is likely that a number of the cisterns on the mound — including one whose capacity was greater than 60,000 gallons — were first carved out of bedrock during this period. Of major interest were two tombs found in the Roman cemetery. The heavy stone door of one still swung on its vertical pivots. The door of the other was sealed by a large rolling stone. This finding is important, not only because the tomb is one of the few surviving examples similar to the one in which Jesus was buried, but because so far it is the only example discovered east of the Jordan River.

But the major surprise of the 1971 season was to find that the Roman stratum just above bedrock was apparently the earliest stratigraphically attested occupation of the site! It is possible that the Hellenistic period will still be represented in a cave in one area. But on and around the acropolis there appears to be nothing earlier, despite a bountiful supply of seventh/sixth century B.C. potsherds mixed in with those of most later periods — except in one area where they were found unmixed, but only in layers of fill, and therefore without associated seventh-sixth century B.C. surfaces or architecture. These sherds, however, provide a basis for conjecture that somewhere on the mound there must have been a seventh/sixth century B.C. city. But that is as far as present evidence (which represents a good sampling of the site) goes.

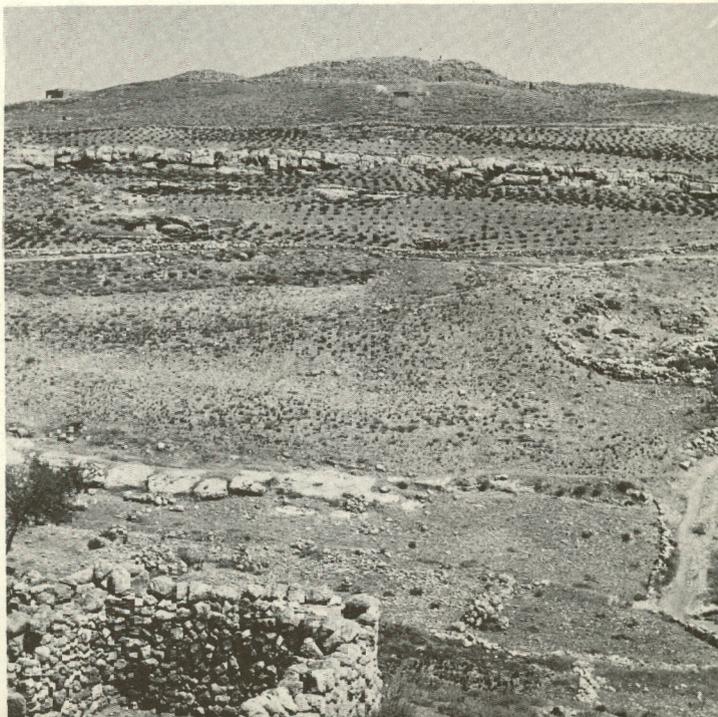


ABOVE: Aerial view of *Tell Hesban* looking east toward the "King's Highway" — the historically important thoroughfare through Moab and Edom. The northern summit of the ancient mound, the "acropolis," is in the center (the excavation's trenches are here). On the southern summit are the scattered dwellings of the modern village of Hesban. The wadi on the left eventually empties into the Jordan Valley. Photograph by ALVIN TRACE.

BELOW, LEFT: Aerial view of *Tell Hesban's* acropolis, with the excavated areas clearly visible. Elsewhere, under the rock-strewn surface, ancient walls can be traced. Across the wadi to the west (upper left) a portion of the ancient cemetery serves the modern villagers as a series of animal pens. Photograph by ALVIN TRACE.



BELOW: The excavated acropolis of *Tell Hesban* is east of *Wadi Hesban*, the valley in the foreground. Lying between is a limestone ridge that undoubtedly served as one of the chief quarries for the extensive building operations on the mound. Photograph by GEORGE UNGER.



THE ALTERNATIVES. Disagreement apparently being the case, how can the biblical and the archaeological evidence for Heshbon be correlated? Where is the city of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Solomon, and David — let alone the city of Moses and Sihon! The results confirm neither the fifteenth nor the thirteenth century B.C. dates for the exodus and conquest. *What, then, are the alternatives?*

33

1. *The Bible is wrong.* This is a case where archaeology confutes the Scriptures. Scholars who doubted the historicity of the exodus-conquest account were right after all, especially when one puts this new Heshbon evidence with the negative evidence uncovered at Jericho and Ai (the next two towns taken by Israel, both of which have been extensively excavated, yet appear not to have been occupied in the late Bronze Age, the era of Moses). But this alternative is entirely unacceptable to one who has seen the historicity of the biblical account vindicated with increasing frequency. One must say, rather, that not all the evidence is in yet. Having come to trust the biblical record at other points, one is confident that again it will prove reliable when the complete archaeological context is available.

2. *Understanding of the Bible is wrong.* Perhaps more is demanded of the Bible than can be required. For instance, Sihon could have been a semi-nomad who would have left little evidence of his presence. The Song of Songs may have used a poetic formula that need not imply concurrent occupation of Heshbon. Furthermore, who can say for sure when the Song was written? Isaiah and Jeremiah might have used the name in much the same way — stock phrases to refer to the territory east of the Jordan River, though the sites themselves had long since lain uninhabited. Although some such interpretation might be admissible for a reference or two, it would be stretching a hermeneutical principle to apply it to every mention of Heshbon. No, the biblical traditions pertaining to Heshbon are too strong to make this alternative suitable.

3. *Interpretation of the archaeological evidence is faulty.* This alternative is often suggested by the nonarchaeologist. He asks, "How can you be sure of your pottery typology and whether your techniques for absolute dating are accurate?" There is certainly room for error here, but usually such error is in the magnitude of decades, not centuries. Through comparative stratigraphy from scores of ancient sites that have been dug, the dating methods of Palestinian archaeology have become extremely accurate. This alternative is easily dismissed by at least the "initiated."

4. *Then surely the site must be wrong.* Tell Hesban is not Heshbon.

Despite the linguistic equivalence of the ancient and modern names, the biblical evidence does not match the archaeological evidence (there appears to be no problem with regard to the postbiblical literary evidence). Though this may appear to be an attractive alternative at first, it becomes less so when one considers that Tell Hesban's precise location and prominence make it the most likely possibility for Heshbon — indeed a likelihood unquestioned in the history of scholarship. Furthermore, the stratigraphic and numismatic evidence from the medieval Arabic period coincide well with the literary sources of the period, making it probable that the site was Heshbon that far back at least. The position on the old Roman Road plus the extensive Roman fortified remains make it highly likely that the site was Esbus of Jesus' day. This leads to the next alternative.

5. *Biblical Heshbon is at Tell Hesban but must be sought further down the slopes.* More likely it is on the more southern (but less elevated) of the mound's two hills — not on the acropolis to which the Roman and later periods expanded. This alternative is naturally favored by an expedition that has already invested many thousands of dollars and more than three months in the field to achieve its goals at this site. Hence the next season will see the expedition expand its work to other sectors of the mound in order to provide an even wider sampling of its history. Although always hopeful, I personally doubt that this alternative will provide the solution. Not only does surface survey fail to indicate earlier ceramic evidence, but (more telling) the regularity with which bedrock seems to peek through the surface soil indicates a lack of depth of occupation on the mound that leaves one skeptical.

6. *Tell Hesban is the Heshbon of Jesus' day and later, but the name was moved to this site when the Old Testament site somewhere else in the vicinity was abandoned for some unknown reason.* If the previous alternative does not prove correct, this one (on analogy with such a well-known site as Jericho) is surely the most likely. Tell Hesban is on the edge of a *wadi* (dry stream bed) of the same name that leads to ʿAin Hesban, a perennial spring about three miles to the west. The spring's copious flow forms at least one pool, and sometimes more, known locally in Arabic as "the pools of Heshbon." Since this spring is the only natural water source in the whole vicinity, could these pools be the ones referred to in the Song of Songs? A preliminary surface survey of this area (not in any way exhaustive) disclosed other ancient sites nearer the spring, though no other is as impressive as Tell Hesban and no other appears to predate it. But proximity to a dependable water supply was perhaps the first consideration in the choice of

a site for an ancient town. Hence a thorough survey of all sites within a limited radius of 'Ain Hesban would appear to be a high priority goal for a future season of excavation.

III

TOWARD A SOLUTION. Until the last two alternatives are acted on, it would be premature to say whether the archaeological evidence from Heshbon confirms or confutes the Bible. In the meantime, one can and should raise the more general question of what archaeology can and cannot be expected to do with regard to the problem posed.¹⁰ It must be remembered that, at best, archaeological evidence is only partial — among other reasons, because of the accident of preservation and discovery — and therefore cannot really prove anything except the existence of the artifacts actually found. Questions may be asked of this evidence, of course, and answers will be forthcoming according to the presuppositions of the questioner.

In other words, archaeological evidence is useful in structuring a hypothesis but can hardly prove the hypothesis. Nor can the evidence prove the Bible in the sense that the Bible's historical validity can be demonstrated — much less its religious validity, which must always be accepted by faith. Rather, since the Bible is a text, archaeological evidence can only confirm or confute an *interpretation* of that text, and not the text itself. Therefore, to relate archaeological evidence to biblical evidence, one must start with the actual text. After one arrives at an interpretation based on the use of all available literary tools, then it is this *interpretation* of the Bible that may be tested by the critically sifted evidence provided by archaeology. If one is an honest biblical interpreter, he will naturally attempt to find a solution to his problem that best suits *all* the evidence available to him at the time.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 A good summary of this position may be found in George Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, revised (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1962), chapters four and five.
- 2 I Kings 6:1; compare Judges 11:26.
- 3 Nelson Glueck, Explorations in eastern Palestine I-IV, *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 14 (1934), 15 (1935), 18-19 (1939), 25-28 (1951). A more popular account is contained in Nelson Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan*, revised (Cambridge, Massachusetts: American Schools of Oriental Research 1970).
- 4 Heshbon's history from the literary sources available to us (including the Bible) is discussed by Werner Vyhmeister, The history of Heshbon from literary sources, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 6:158-177 (July 1968).

- 5 The best treatment of this Amorite victory song is by Paul D. Hanson, *The song of Heshbon and David's Nir*, *Harvard Theological Review* 61:297-320 (July 1968).
- 6 Numbers 32:37; Joshua 13:15-21, 24-28; 21:34-40.
- 7 Among them II Samuel 8:2; 24:4-5; I Kings 4:7, 19.
- 8 Isaiah 15:1-4; 16:6-11; Jeremiah 48:1-2, 34-36, 45-47; 49:1-6.
- 9 A full preliminary report of the 1968 season appeared in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7 (July 1969) and the report for the 1971 season is scheduled for publication in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (July 1972). A more popular account by Siegfried H. Horn appeared in the article *The 1968 Heshbon expedition*, *The Biblical Archaeologist* 32:26-41 (May 1969) and in a number of Seventh-day Adventist church periodicals.
- 10 Compare the recent discussions of this issue by Roland de Vaux; George Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1962), pp. 70-76; and in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, edited by J. Sanders in honor of Nelson Glueck (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1971), pp. 64-80.

Comments

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The basic position from which my comments on Geraty's observations are drawn is that of chief archaeologist for the 1968 and 1971 seasons of the Andrews University expedition to Heshbon. Essentially, this involved (a) being in charge of training the staff in general field procedures and recording, (b) supervising the field excavation, (c) offering instruction in specific field procedures, and (d) drawing up the initial draft of an integrated preliminary report on the excavation results from each season's work.

The most significant point of view from which my comments are made is this: *I had no special predisposition to any particular historical conclusions concerning the data in advance of our excavation and examination of the archaeological data.* As any scholar attempts to do in preparation, I included a review of the literary evidences possibly pertaining to the site under inquiry; but I had no precommitment as to how the specific archaeological data would relate to the literary evidence.

My initial comment has to do with the general archaeological context of the selection of the site. Relatively little work relating to biblical history has been done on east bank locations in Jordan. There is currently a considerable amount of activity under way, by both British and American expeditions, but our basic knowledge of east bank history in archaeological terms is still minimal. It is increasingly apparent that the Tell Hesban excavations will provide a major contribution of new knowledge in this matter, whatever the relation of that knowledge may be to particular issues or episodes in biblical history.

Geraty quite adequately summarizes the problem, the biblical evidence, and the archaeological evidence to date. I would simply amplify the latter point (from the perspective of the present state of preparation of the preliminary report on the 1971 season) to say that there is (a) clear ceramic and numismatic evidence of seven major stages of occupation history and (b) stratigraphic evidence indicating at least fifteen discernible strata of occupation history on some portions (if not all) of the *tell*.

The chronological identifications possible from comparative studies of the numismatic and ceramic evidence allow the following date ranges for the periods indicated.

Islamic	12th-16th centuries A.D.
Islamic	7th-8th centuries A.D.
Byzantine	4th-5th centuries A.D.
Roman	3rd century A.D.
Roman	1st century A.D. - 1st century B.C.
Hellenistic	2nd century B.C.
Iron Age	7th-6th century B.C.

As to alternatives discussed, I have the following comments:

1. The option that *the biblical record is in error*. Even though one may accept for the moment the general historicity of the biblical account, it would seem that a general dependability about historical conditions does not prove accuracy in every particular instance. Errors on the part of biblical tradition formation or transmission can be quite particular, in spite of a general pattern of dependability. There is danger in stating sweeping alternatives that the Bible is always entirely right or that the Bible is never right. It's quite possible that the Bible is right many times without being right every time.

2. The option that *our understanding of the Bible is wrong* must always be allowed. We may claim a general accuracy in our sense of what biblical literature involves, but yet allow the possibility that our errors may also be particular. We may have specific gaps in knowledge of the nature of bibli-

cal history, or of biblical literature reporting that history. It would seem reasonable to assert that the biblical traditions may convey to us generally accurate information about the history of a given place, but that we may still be mistaken in our conclusions about the implications of this information for a particular period or for a particular episode.

Anyone who works with the diverse, and frequently fragmentary, nature of archaeological evidence must honestly acknowledge that his interpretations may stand at fault. The archaeological task is a combination of detective work and jigsaw puzzle work, and one knows frequently, as he starts working toward a solution, that he may have only a very few pieces of the puzzle from which the pattern may be discerned in the first place. The development of hypotheses about the meaning of the archaeological data may seem far more esoteric to one outside the practice of the craft than to one inside. As one with ten years of exposure and experience in fieldwork and interpretation, I believe that considerable humility in the claims of the adequacy of hypothetical reconstructions of history is always in order. Separating conclusions from possibilities — and then proceeding further to probabilities and to reasonable certainties — is a task in which individual judgments frequently differ. The way to the truth is through the vigorous crossfire and examination of professional colleagues in the task.

3-5. As to the option that *the site identified is not biblical Heshbon*, a casual survey of the immediate surroundings of modern Tell Hesban indicates that within comparatively short distances there are sites that may have been occupied at other periods than those uncovered in the evidence thus far. But we know too little about the modes in which place-names “move” to draw any quick conclusions about other adjacent sites’ having had the traditional name. Soundings would have to be conducted at those sites on a rather thorough survey pattern.

In this connection, Geraty’s fifth option, having to do with the need to explore other portions of the *tell*, is certainly in order. Whether or not the schedule is feasible remains to be settled, if one’s aims in doing a major expedition include thorough scientific completion of work begun. But this is a matter for the excavators’ administrative decisions. Although Geraty has every right to adopt a personally “doubtful” stance on the likelihood that other portions of the *tell* might provide the missing data (and although the judgment even of a majority of the core staff might sustain such doubts at the moment), it is a principle in archaeological fieldwork that one does not write the results of future evidence before investigating. On this matter, therefore, caution is appropriate until soundings to bedrock

have been conducted in scattered locations. In the archaeology business it is a cliché that “the answers lie below.”

6. Consideration of ʿAin Hesban as a possible alternative to Tell Hesban as the biblical city is certainly well worth exploring. It seems in order, however, to say that this is no easier an attempt at a solution than would be soundings conducted at the other adjacent sites which might provide occupation evidences in the “gaps” evident so far, matching literary evidence expectations to archaeological data in hand. While water supply no doubt figures in the consideration of the locations of ancient cities, the extensive cistern constructions already found on the acropolis and the surrounding slopes of Tell Hesban show that an immediately available source of fresh water was not the only way to arrange for such needs. The point would seem to be that exploration for “surrounding site evidence support” need not limit itself to those sites in an immediate proximity to an obvious dependable source of fresh water.

Geraty’s discussion leading *toward a solution* suggests the alternative of concluding that the archaeological evidence either “confirms or confutes the Bible” with reference to Tell Hesban. It would seem to be a reasonable possibility that the evidence might confirm in some respects and refute in others. Although any discussion of the meaning of the evidence still in the process of excavation is necessarily tentative, and much more detailed analysis (particularly, of the ceramic evidence) is needed to firm up what conclusions are possible from the archaeological data, this would not be the first instance in which the archaeological support might be positive toward some aspects of biblical testimony and negative toward others.

This leads to the final comment on the relation of archaeological evidence to biblical text. Geraty prefers to begin with the actual text in an assessment of related archaeological and biblical evidence. I would argue that this option is *one choice*, and a very legitimate option. I would also add that it would seem not necessarily the only option. It is similarly possible to start from the accumulation of archaeological data to explore what knowledge of history can be reconstructed from that data. Such knowledge will depend on the range, precision, and mesh that the varied data allow in any given instance. That this knowledge is subject to all the limitations of fragmentary excavation (and the unpredictable risks of what evidence survives and in what condition it survives) is evident.

It is quite possible to proceed to interpret the text and then to test the interpretation by critical application of archaeological evidence, and it is also possible to proceed to construct a view of the apparent historical occu-

pations of a site from the archaeological data, and then to incorporate what light literary evidence may shed on those periods in which occupation seems archaeologically evident. In either alternative, I would agree with Geraty's statement that one would seek a solution to the problem that best suits *all* the evidence. But one is not arbitrarily bound to start from one side any more than from the other in coming to such conclusions.

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40

Although I believe that what was accomplished at Heshbon deserves a more thorough elaboration and should inspire greater excitement than Geraty's discussion leaves me with, I am generally in accord with his summary of the work that has been done and his analysis of the results to date.

There are four specific reasons, I believe, for emphasizing the importance of archaeological excavations at Tell Hesban:

1. The dig at Heshbon is especially important in light of the prevailing controversy about that site's relation to the knottiest problem with which biblical archaeology has attempted to deal: the dating of the Exodus from Egypt.¹

2. Heshbon is important from a purely archaeological point of view, as it is the first site in which fine seventh/sixth century Ammonite pottery has been discovered in a stratigraphically controlled excavation.²

3. The expedition to Jordan is politically a very favorable gesture for four reasons: *First*, the workers are excavating stratigraphically and carefully saving the Arabic remains which in another country in Palestine are being bulldozed away. *Second*, the presence of an expedition maintains a tradition which was about to die out — American-sponsored excavations in Transjordan. Third, the forty foreigners, who automatically became tourists in a country where tourists are still scarce, are somehow especially suited as an elect audience for "consciousness raising" in the Arab cause. *Fourth*, the money poured into the comparatively modest national economy of Jordan — through general operating expenses for the dig, through wages amounting to over \$10,000 each season for almost 150 workers, and through the private spending of staff members — is not a negligible sum.

4. Perhaps the most significant result of the efforts at Heshbon, however, is that Adventists have been initiated into the archaeological community

and have finally begun the long overdue payment of the debt owed to hundreds of biblical scholars whose labors no successful Adventist evangelist would regard as trivial. Now, at last, a substantial contribution is being made to scholarship, and valuable contacts with many different people and universities are being made. (The majority of the expedition's staff members are non-Adventists from more than a dozen universities around the world.)

Having cited some of the reasons why I believe Heshbon to be a valuable enterprise, I would like to focus on Geraty's observation that "until the last two alternatives are acted on, it would be premature to say whether the archaeological evidence from Heshbon confirms or confutes the Bible."

I believe that we need to act soon, in order to have the wherewithal to work, especially now that the political situation is stable and relations between Jordan and the United States are friendly.

A dig in the summer of 1973 has been guaranteed by the administration of Andrews University. I recommend that all who by now have become interested in the Heshbon project consider the reasons for an undelayed return to Jordan and participate in this project by sending contributions for its realization.³ The question of whether or not Heshbon confirms or confutes the Bible is answered not only by the archaeologist's spade, but by all who have given in order that it might be put to use.

REFERENCES

- 1 Herbert F. Hahn, *The Old Testament in Modern Research* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1954), p. 196.
- 2 Siegfried H. Horn, *The second season of excavations at Heshbon summer 1971* (unpublished manuscript), p. 8.
- 3 Contributions should be sent to the director of the Heshbon expedition, Dr. Siegfried H. Horn, at Andrews University.