

ARTICLES

Shechem in the Light of Archaeological Evidence

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Shechem is the first city of Palestine mentioned in the Bible (Gen. 12:6, "Sichem" in the KJV). It was also one of the most important cities of Canaan due to its favorable geographical location. Lying at the eastern entrance of the only east-west mountain pass of central Palestine where it crosses the main south-north road of the inland area, Shechem controlled one of the vital arteries of the country. Mount Ebal towers over it to the north and Mount Gerizim, holy mountain of the Samaritans, rises to the south. It could thus appropriately be called the "navel" of the land (Judg. 9:37).

Although Shechem has been dead for more than two thousand years, the site still attracts tourists because of Jacob's Well in the immediate vicinity. This well was the scene of the memorable discussion between Christ and the Samaritan woman recorded in John 4.

SHECHEM'S HISTORY FROM LITERARY SOURCES

Shechem is first mentioned in an Egyptian hieroglyphic stone inscription that contains the biography of Khu-Sebek, an official of King Sesostri III (1878-1840 B.C.). The stone describes a military campaign to Palestine in which Khu-Sebek took part. The main objective of that campaign seems to have been the punishment of Shechem (spelled *Skmm*) for some crime that is not recorded. The campaign was successful and Shechem was captured. However, the city was not occupied, and the Egyptian forces returned to Egypt after completing their punitive action.

The other Egyptian texts that mention Shechem were written on crudely fashioned clay figurines representing captured Palestinians with their arms bound on their backs. These figurines were used for magical

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purposes, to curse the political enemies of the Egyptian king—in this case rulers of foreign countries. The name of each enemy and that of his city was written on the figurines, together with a formula of curses. The figurines were then smashed to the accompaniment of appropriate ceremonies, participants believing that the enemies would be made impotent by this procedure. On one group of such “execration texts” coming from the nineteenth century B.C., the name of Shechem (here spelled *Skmimi*) appears and also the name of its ruler, *Abas-haddu*. The name reveals that he was an Amorite, the second part being the name of the Semitic storm-god, more generally known as Hadad.

At approximately the same time from which these texts come, the patriarch Abraham first came to Canaan. Arriving in the Promised Land, he pitched his tent first at Shechem, where he also erected an altar to the true God (Gen. 12:6, 7). Later, Jacob is said to have purchased a piece of land there from “the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father” (Gen. 33:18-20); Genesis 48:22 preserves the tradition of a military conquest of land in that area by Jacob. It is possible that it refers to the massacre of Shechem by Jacob’s sons, carried out to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34).

One story mentions Joseph at Shechem in search of his brothers, who had grazed their flocks there (Gen. 37:12-14), and Joshua 24:32 says that Joseph was buried at Shechem. A Moslem shrine stands today at the traditional site of Joseph’s burial.

From the early fourteenth century B.C. come the Amarna Letters written by Syrian, Palestinian and other Asiatic rulers to the Egyptian kings Amenhotep III and IV. These letters mention Labayu as ruler of Shechem, and also state that he had surrendered his land to the *CApiru*, bands of stateless people who menaced various Palestinian city states at that time.

After the Israelites entered Canaan, Shechem seems to have played an important role as a tribal rallying site. First, a ceremony is recorded to have taken place, according to which the twelve tribes of Israel stood on the slopes of the two mountains, Ebal and Gerizim, and antiphonally pronounced the blessings and curses which would follow their obedience or disobedience to God (Deut. 11:26-29; Josh. 8:30-35). Later the Israelites gathered again at Shechem to listen to Joshua’s farewell address and renew their covenant with God (Josh. 24). Many scholars believe that such a renewal of the covenant was regularly and repeatedly carried out at Shechem, and that Joshua 24 describes merely the inauguration of this custom.

Shechem played a role again during the period of the judges as the seat of the short-lived kingdom of Abimelech, Gideon’s illegitimate

son (Judg. 9). Abimelech, by his mother a citizen of Shechem, aspired to his father's place as leader of the nation. In the execution of his plans he first obtained the support of his fellow citizens, who gave him seventy shekels from the treasury of the temple of Ba'al-berith, which means "Lord of the covenant." Abimelech then hired a group of outlaws with whose help he slaughtered all his brothers, crowning himself king "by the oak of the pillar at Shechem." His kingdom, founded on murder and lawlessness, did not last long, and the people who supported him in the beginning later rose in rebellion against his tyrannical rule. In the ensuing struggle Shechem was destroyed and many of its citizens killed.

Shechem must have quickly risen from its ruins, for its later history indicates that it had lost little, if any, of its importance. This fact is evident in that after Solomon's death representatives of the whole nation of Israel gathered at Shechem, the most centrally located city of Palestine, to choose a successor to Solomon. It is well known how Rehoboam, Solomon's son, lost more than half of the kingdom by following the foolish advice of young counselors, while refusing to listen to the justified request of the people for a lightening of the public burden. The result of his rash decision was that ten tribes seceded from the House of David and formed their own kingdom under Jeroboam. Jeroboam, having gained his kingdom at Shechem, made this city his first capital. Later he moved the capital, first to Penuel in Transjordan, and then to Tirzah (I Kings 12:25; 14:17). The move to Transjordan may have been occasioned by the invasion of Shishak of Egypt; that he did not return to Shechem after the war was probably due to the fact that Shechem had been completely destroyed, as the excavations have shown.

From that time on Shechem seems to have experienced a period of eclipse, for it is not mentioned in the Bible for centuries. However, the city appears as belonging to the tax area of Samaria, shown in royal receipts of the eighth century B.C. found during the excavations of Samaria—the Samaria ostraca. The city is mentioned incidentally in two more Old Testament passages. The eighth-century prophet Hosea complains that bands of priests, probably idolatrous priests, murdered people on the way to Shechem (Hos. 6:9). Jeremiah, one hundred fifty years later, recorded an incident in which Shechem is mentioned as one of the places from which eighty men came, planning to offer sacrifices in Jerusalem, when they were intercepted at Mizpah and for the most part treacherously killed (Jer. 41:4-5).

Once more, for about two centuries, Shechem played a significant role during the Hellenistic period. When Andromachus, Alexander's governor of Coele-Syria, was assassinated by the people of Samaria, the enraged king had many of Samaria's citizens killed and the rest driven out.

They moved to Shechem, which thus received a significant increase in population and again gained in importance. Approximately at this time the Samaritans built a temple on the summit of Mount Gerizim, which thus became their holy mountain. This temple stood for about two hundred years until the Maccabean king John Hyrcanus destroyed it in 128 B.C. A few years later Shechem shared the fate of this temple, and after this destruction never regained its importance.

In the latter part of the first century A.D. a new city, located less than two miles to the west of ancient Shechem, was founded by the emperor Vespasian. He called it Neapolis Flavianus, "New city of the Flavians," Flavian being his family name. This city, now called Nablus, has become the successor of Shechem, and is at present an important city of central Palestine.

HISTORY OF EXCAVATIONS

This brief sketch of Shechem's checkered history shows that it was an interesting and important city. Hence, archaeologists had reason to expect exciting discoveries and finds here. It could also be expected that its exploration would provide valuable information concerning the history of the country and its people. In this respect the site of ancient Shechem has not been a disappointment. Not only have extremely valuable discoveries been made, but even the history of the excavations themselves has been hectic and exciting.

In June 1903, two German explorers, G. Hölscher and H. Thiersch, who camped east of Nablus, first suggested that the popular view of identifying Nablus with ancient Shechem was erroneous. Discovering remains of ancient structures on *Tell Balâtah*, they recognized in the *tell* the unmistakable site of the ancient city. This identification was later fully confirmed by the excavations. About 1910 another interesting discovery was made when native villagers of *Balâtah*, in excavations for the foundation of a house, uncovered a hoard of ancient bronze weapons, among which was a sickle sword, about eighteen inches long and inlaid with gold. It must have belonged to an ancient nobleman, if not to a prince.

Excavations at *Tell Balâtah* began in 1913 under the direction of Ernst Sellin, at that time of Vienna, and were continued in 1914. During these two seasons the Northwest Gate and part of a huge "cyclopean wall" were uncovered. World War I interrupted the work until 1926, when Sellin returned to Shechem. During three seasons, from 1926-1928, he and his associates excavated a large building, considered by Sellin to be the temple of Baal-berith, and an adjoining "palace" area, also parts of the East Gate and portions of the city walls, plus some residential areas. Denounced by his architect-archaeologist, G. Welter, for incompetence,

Sellin was relieved of the direction of the German expedition. However, Welter's work carried out in the following years was even less satisfactory, with the result that Sellin was reinstated. He returned to Shechem in 1934 for one short campaign, but the monetary crisis in Germany and later the outbreak of World War II made it impossible for him to continue his work after 1934. To make matters worse, practically all records of the expeditions were destroyed in a bombing raid on Berlin in 1943, when Sellin's house received a direct hit.

New excavations began in 1956, this time under the direction of G. Ernest Wright, sponsored by Drew University and McCormick Theological Seminary. Seven campaigns have so far been carried out (1956, 1957, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966, 1968). By applying modern scientific methods, scholars have been able to date and plausibly identify the structures already excavated by the German expeditions, to establish a chronology of the various occupational strata found at the site, and to reconstruct the ancient history of the city. The Drew-McCormick expedition also discovered the temple of Hadrian on one of the summits of Mount Gerizim, and the remains of an earlier Hellenistic structure underneath, which most probably is the substructure of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, whose whereabouts had so far been unknown.

SHECHEM'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

The main result of the recent seasons of excavations at Shechem has been a successful reconstruction of the history of this biblical city on the basis of archaeological findings in comparison with the evidence obtained from literary sources, mainly from the Bible. The following pages present a brief sketch of these historical results obtained during the excavations.

The Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Periods. The earliest remains found during the excavations at Shechem come from the Chalcolithic period (fourth millennium). Underneath the later temple a pit was found containing charcoal, bones, and some seeds, besides Chalcolithic shards. It was probably a hearth of a camping site. A Chalcolithic stratum was also found in one of the residential quarters of the ancient city (Field IX).

Of the Early Bronze Age, representing the third millennium B.C., only shards in later fills have come to light, indicative of a settlement which must have existed at the site of later Shechem. However, in the area excavated no architectural features of that period have been found, for which reason it is not known whether a city or town existed in the third millennium, or whether only an open camp stood at this site.

Shechem in the Middle Bronze Age. The same can be said of the earliest period of the Middle Bronze Age (MB I) which covers approximately one century, from 1950-1850 B.C. So far only some pottery of this period has come to light, and this pottery invariably was found in later fills.

The earliest evidence of buildings comes from the next century (1850-1750), the MB II A period. A massive filling operation to prepare an area (Field VI) for some public use, several unconnected walls and a silo underneath Street 9, the lowest of the MB streets in Field VI, testify to the fact that Shechem was a built-up place at that time. This is the period when the city is mentioned for the first time in Egyptian records, and it also coincides with the earliest period of the biblical patriarchs. No evidence has come to light of any fortifications existing at that time, for which reason it must be concluded that Abraham encountered an un-walled town when he set up camp in the shadow of Shechem.

At the beginning of the MB II B period (1750-1650) Shechem received its first city wall, a brick structure resting on a stone foundation, 2.50 m. wide (Wall D). However, very soon, probably before 1700 B.C., this wall was greatly strengthened by an earthen embankment of 30 m. width thrown against it from the outside. This embankment was held in place at its western end by a battered wall of stone, 5 m. high (Wall C). It has become clear that this strong earthen fortification system was built by the Hyksos, who are known to have enclosed their cities with rampart-like fortifications in many places.

At the same time a wall (Wall 900) was built approximately 20 m. east of Wall D. This wall, constructed of well-laid stones, separated the acropolis with its public buildings from the rest of the residential city. During the century of the MB II period a great deal of building and rebuilding went on in the space between Wall 900 and the western fortification, consisting of Wall D and its embankment, held in place by Wall C. Four building phases can clearly be recognized, which means that a major rebuilding of the area with a new structural layout took place on an average of every twenty-five years during the MB II B period.

In the excavated part there were always two main structures, one in the northern part of the area and the other in the southern part. The southern building is of special interest, because it may have been an open-air sanctuary, or courtyard temple. While the plan of the structure changed with every rebuilding, a courtyard always remained at the same spot, and within this larger courtyard there was a smaller one. Since this latter court lay underneath the altar of the later temple, which thus seems to have perpetuated the sacredness of the site, it is quite possible that the structure containing the courtyards was a courtyard temple,

which G. E. Wright has compared with the later courtyard temples at Boghazköy and with a temple at Bethshan.

Shechem saw its greatest building activities during the next century, i.e., in the MB II C period (1650-1550 B.C.). It was in the midst of the Hyksos period, circa 1650, that cyclopean Wall A and the Northwest Gate were erected. The 4 m.-thick Wall A was built of large stones to a height of up to 10 m. and had a batter of 1.60 m., which means that its outer face sloped outward toward the base. West of the Northwest Gate a tremendous fill was thrown against the inner face of Wall A, reaching to its top. This fill was pulled from the top of the earthen embankment of the preceding period. Such a system of fortification could easily withstand the force of battering rams and would have made sapping operations difficult or impossible. The Northwest Gate was set almost 6 m. above the foundations of Wall A, and could be reached only over an earthen ramp that led straight up to the gate's threshold, making it difficult for an enemy to approach the city's gate.

In the eastern part of the mound, Wall A has been found deeply buried in the debris against the mound's side. Very soon after its construction, probably not later than 1600, the wall system in the eastern and northern part of the city was strengthened by the building of Wall B on the edge of the mound's summit, about 10-11 m. inside Wall A. This new wall seems to have been constructed of bricks with wooden battlements. It rested on a stone socket 3.25-3.75 m. thick. The spread of the collapsed wall fallen inwardly, as observed in Field III, leads to the conclusion that Wall B originally had a height of circa 10 m. The space between the lower outer Wall A and the higher inner Wall B was then filled with earth and the surface of this sloping fill was plastered. In this way a formidable fortification of some 16 m. thickness was created which formed an impregnable line of defense for the city.

At the time of the construction of Wall B the East Gate was built. This gate was similar to the Northwest Gate except that it had two pairs of towers instead of three, and two entrances, lying one behind the other. The two entrances, wider than the three entrances of the Northwest Gate, formed a court, on both sides of which were guard rooms. The lower parts of the entrance towers were protected by large pairs of monoliths.

The defensive system built by the Hyksos was destroyed after the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt, when the victorious Egyptian armies marched through Palestine and conquered its cities. Evidence found in the East Gate showed that a battering ram had dislodged and broken one of the large monoliths when the gate was taken in storm and destroyed, while in Field III the remains of Wall B lay fallen inside the city, with the

wall's wooden parts burned and charred. A second wave of destruction must have followed within a few years after the first. Wright, discussing the evidence, attributes the two destructions respectively to Ahmose (ca. 1570-1545) and Amenhotep I (ca. 1545-1525).

At the time when Wall A was constructed (ca. 1650 B.C.) the great temple of *El-berith* or *Baal-berith* (Judg. 9:4, 46) was also built. For that purpose the former public buildings, including the courtyard temples standing between the embankment and Wall 900, were covered with layers of dirt to produce a large platform. The temple had an outside size of 26.30 x 21.20 m. Its walls were 5.10 m. thick. The entrance hall at the east side was 7 m. wide and 5 m. deep. In front of the temple was a plastered walkway coming over the fill that had been laid over the courtyard temple. It came from the top of Wall 900 and gave access to the temple from the city. An altar stood in front of the temple, and perhaps also two standing stones (*maṣṣebboth*) in front of the two towers, although it is certain only that they were there after the temple was renovated about fifty years after its first building. When the city was destroyed by the Egyptians circa 1550 B.C., the temple shared the fate of the fortifications and gates.

Not much can be said about remains of the MB levels in the residential areas of the city, because the excavated areas were nowhere large enough to uncover complete houses and thus have not produced coherent house plans. During the excavations of MB levels, stone walls, three superimposed lime kilns, several thick plaster floors, and also floors made of nicely-laid, large square bricks, came to light.

After Shechem, including its fortifications, public buildings, and residential areas, suffered two violent destructions in the space of a few years in the middle of the sixteenth century B.C. (as was mentioned above), the city seems to have lain empty and waste for about a century before it recovered from these catastrophes. No remains of any consequence from circa 1540 to 1450 have been found.

Shechem in the Late Bronze Age. The rebuilding of Shechem began about 1450 B.C. Walls A and B were rebuilt, the former wall with a buttress wall behind it, and the latter in the form of a casemate wall, which means that chambers were created with the help of a parallel thinner wall and a number of cross walls. Also the East Gate was rebuilt, in part on a new plan. The old entrance was used as a sunken passageway, because the city behind the gate, built now on the MB debris, lay on a higher level than the East Gate. These fortifications seem to have existed until the twelfth century, the time of Abimelech.

The temple was also rebuilt, this time like most of the Canaanite temples, with a broad-room cella; the term means that the entrance wall

is longer (ca. 16 m.) than the side walls (ca. 12:50 m.). The walls were narrower than those of the earlier temple, and were orientated 33 degrees south of east, a difference of 5 degrees with the MB temple. This change of orientation cannot be explained. It may have been due to a change in religious concepts. The original towers were rebuilt, and the MB altar was raised by putting a new layer of stones on top of the fill within the former altar. In front of this altar (to the east of it) a huge *massebah* was erected, the largest so far discovered in excavations in Palestine. This monolith, now broken diagonally, has a width of 1.48 m. and a thickness of 42 cm. The height of the surviving fragment is 1.45 m. on one side and 62 cm. on the other. The original height is unknown. It was found by Sellin lying on its socket, a trough-like stone into which the *massebah* fitted nicely. The Drew-McCormick expedition re-erected it on its base and secured it with cement.

This temple, erected about 1450 B.C., must have been standing at the time when the Israelites took the land and performed at Shechem the great covenant ceremonies already mentioned. The temple was then destroyed by Abimelech in the twelfth century together with the LB city, as the excavated evidence indicates.

The residential areas as far as they have been excavated have not contributed much to an understanding of LB Shechem. In Field VII the structures of Stratum XIII show that a relatively prosperous community must have existed there until Abimelech destroyed it. In that stratum the well-preserved bronze statuette of a male deity of the Ba'al or Resheph type was found. During the excavations of Sellin, some cuneiform tablets and other objects came to light in LB strata which also provided evidence that the LB city had been quite prosperous.

Iron Age Shechem. Most of the evidence for the period in which the Israelites were in control of the city comes from the residential areas excavated by the Drew-McCormick expedition. Strata XII and XI in Fields VII and IX probably belong to the periods of Solomon and Jeroboam I, when Shechem was first the administrative center of a district, and then briefly the capital of the Northern Kingdom. An end came to the city through the invasion of Pharaoh Shishak a few years after Solomon's death (I Kings 14:25-28). A thick layer of ashes and charcoal, covering the remains of Stratum XI almost everywhere, testifies to the violence of the destruction of Shechem at that time. The next stratum (Stratum X) consists of poor wall stumps, indicating that only a hasty and poorly organized rebuilding of the city took place after Shishak's campaign.

During the next two centuries (ca. 920-722) the city was rebuilt and destroyed four times (Strata IXB, IXA, VIII, VII). At least three of these destructions were the results of Israel's wars with the Syrians and the

Assyrians, although it is possible that the city of Stratum IXB found its end by an earthquake. During the ninth century the temple remains were levelled and covered by a thick layer of cement, into which large rocks were embedded, forming the foundation stones for what seems to have been a storehouse for grain and other commodities. Also the East Gate and the Northwest Gate were rebuilt, and a casemate wall was constructed on top of the old fortifications.

In the eighth century a well-planned and large house with several rooms located around a central courtyard was constructed on the site of Field VII. In its courtyard a large vat and a stone table of a dyeing establishment of an earlier period were covered with stones and then served as the base for a fire pit, perhaps a kiln. This house was destroyed by the Assyrians during their final campaign against Samaria, circa 723/722 B.C. The surviving inhabitants were probably deported to Mesopotamia, because the site of Shechem seems to have been almost deserted after this wholesale destruction.

It took Shechem almost four centuries to recover from its calamity. Yet it was not completely without a population during this period. The excavations have revealed two distinctive strata of occupation from the seventh and sixth centuries. However, few architectural remains have been found representing this period. First, some Assyrian influence is witnessed by locally imitated Assyrian pottery, and second by some Greek pottery and an early Greek coin. By 480 B.C. the *tell* seems to have been abandoned.

Shechem During the Hellenistic Period. The city experienced another great revival during the late fourth century, and again it flourished for about two hundred more years. The excavations in Fields I, II, VII and IX have revealed four distinct building phases during this period. A large number of coins ranging from Alexander the Great to circa 110 B.C. facilitate the dating of the Hellenistic strata and of the pottery. Reconstruction of the old fortification system was undertaken at the beginning of the period, including the rebuilding of the East Gate and the covering of Wall A on the east with a thick glacis. The second of the Hellenistic phases (Stratum III) ended about 190 B.C. when Palestine and Syria changed hands. After having belonged to the Ptolemies for more than a century, the country became part of the Seleucid empire. The fourth and last Hellenistic phase ended shortly before 100 B.C. when John Hyrcanus destroyed Shechem.

Whether the site of Shechem was occupied during the Roman period is not certain, although Sellin reports the discovery of some Roman remains near the village spring of *Balâtah*. It is most probable that a village

always existed in close proximity to this spring, one of the finest in the whole area.

The reader will have noticed from this article that the archaeological investigation of ancient Shechem has illuminated the biblical information about this city in a most interesting way, especially with regard to its cult as the center of a covenant god, by shedding light on the story of Abimelech as told in Judges 9, and by providing interesting sidelights to details of other biblical stories in which Shechem played a role.