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Tall al-ʿUmayri and the Bible

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For six seasons the Madaba Plains Project¹ has been uncovering significant remains at Tall al-ʿUmayri,² located about 10 km south of Amman, Jordan, on the airport highway. In antiquity it most likely lay on one of the most important parts of the ancient King’s Highway and was a strategic site in the control of trade routes traversing the high plateau of Transjordan between the Red Sea and Damascus.

We have found remains from the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3000–2000 BC), the end of the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1700–1550 BC), the end of the Late Bronze Age (13th century BC), the Iron I period (ca. 1200–1000 BC), the early stages of Iron II (ca. 900–800 BC), and the end of Iron Age II and the Persian period (ca. 570–400 BC). Minor occupation existed in later periods (Roman, Byzantine, Early Islamic), but never were there more than solitary buildings or agricultural installations. For our purposes, the early Iron I site is the most interesting from a Biblical and archaeological point of view. We will therefore focus on that period.

¹ The Madaba Plains Project is sponsored by Andrews University in consortium with Canadian University College, LaSierra University, East Africa University, and Walla Walla College. I wish to thank my Co-Directors for their support and encouragement: Larry Geraty (Senior Project Director); Douglas Clark (Consortium Director); Øystein LaBianca (Hinterlands); and Randall Younker (Tall Jalul); I am responsible for the excavations at Tall al-ʿUmayri. Much of the work on the Iron I comparative material was done at the Albright Institute in Jerusalem. I wish to thank the trustees of the Albright for my appointment as Annual Professor during the 1993/94 academic year and the Dorot Foundation for an additional award.

² Note on Place Names: The Royal Geographic Center of Jordan has recently standardized the spellings of place names, following a consistent linguistic pattern. Where possible, this paper follows those spellings. The spelling “Tell el-ʿUmeiri” has been frequently used in the past.

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The Town from the Time of the Judges

The inhabitants of this town constructed an impressive fortification system. Indeed, it is the most extensive and best preserved system from this time anywhere in the southern Levant. A Middle Bronze Age moat at the bottom of the slope was re-excavated, leaving about one meter of debris in the bottom. A retaining wall was built on top of that debris; it supported the new rampart which was built on top of the remains of the Middle Bronze Age rampart. The new rampart filled in a crack in the bedrock caused by an earthquake and raised the top of the rampart by about 1.5-2.0 meters. At the top, the new rampart was built together with what seems to have been an outer casemate wall.

This probable casemate wall, one of the earliest such systems known to date from this part of the world, has been traced over a length of about 30 meters and so far comprises two casemate rooms and three (possibly four) crosswalls. Near the southern extent of our excavation the wall curves into the settlement, perhaps forming a gateway, but we have not yet reached this phase inside the wall to know for certain. The inner wall is broken into segments, but so far they are perfectly aligned like a normal inner casemate wall. In the last season, the inner wall may not have been found north of House B, but floor levels have not yet been reached. Parts of the crosswalls and inner wall segments are preserved over 2 m high, making this the best preserved domestic architecture from this period. If our remains represent an early casemate wall, the present construction may illustrate the origin of this type of wall system in carefully planned houses with back rooms adjoining a more-or-less continuous city wall. More of the wall will be excavated to the north and south in future seasons. Whether or not the casemate construction was limited to the western edge of the site is not known for certain, but Ground Penetrating Radar studies of the southern lip of the site show distinct anomalies of two parallel lines with cross lines having roughly the same dimensions as those we have uncovered. Excavation commenced in this location in 1998.

Portions of two houses have been excavated. Building A contained a cultic corner with a standing stone and a small altar separated from domestic finds in a nearby courtyard by a line of stone pillar bases. In the back was a storeroom which contained about eight large store jars of a type called "collared pithoi" and piles of barley that fell from the roof. There was also a stepped platform that may have supported a ladder reaching to the second story. The huge volume of mudbrick destruction filling the room indicates there was a second story.

Another house, typical of houses from this period, is made up of four rooms, three of which are long rooms and are aligned next to each other. The fourth room crosses the western edge of the three rooms. This house plan is extremely frequent in the southern Levant at this time. Making this house slightly different from most houses of the four-room plan is an attached animal pen in a courtyard in front of the house. The casemate room was extremely rich in finds,

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with almost 40 collared pithoi lining the walls and fallen from the second story. A portion of an alabaster vessel suggests trade with Egypt. Five bronze weapons and a few stone ballistic missiles (slingstones) indicate that the destruction of the site was caused by military attack. The burned bones of at least two individuals, most likely defenders, were found scattered around the room. Probably they fell from the second story during the burning. A well constructed door near the northeastern corner of Building B egressed into an entryway or alley.

The destruction of this small city (ca. 1.5 hectares) was swift and violent. The violence is suggested by the 1.5-2.5 m of destruction debris in the rooms; the ubiquitous signs of burning including burned beams, bricks, and stones (some turned to lime); and the weapons in Room B3. That the destruction was swift is clear from the masses of food (mounds of barley and two shanks of butchered large mammals) still apparently uneaten, and the burned remains of the two individuals caught in the conflagration, an extremely rare find.

The results from Tall al-ʿUmayri provide a focus for looking at the Madaba Plains region during the late 13th and 12th centuries. The finds are the first extensively excavated remains from this period on the central plateau of Transjordan. Very little settlement occurred in the region during the Late Bronze Age, the period immediately preceding our town. ʿUmayri thus represents the beginning stages of highland settlement in Transjordan. This process of sedentarization is reflected in a quantitative study of the pottery forms. The high percentages of utilitarian types, such as collared pithoi, jugs, cooking pots, and bowls, make up approximately 75% of the corpus, connecting the assemblage with simple highland sites rather than the more complex coastal and valley sites.³ Moreover, ʿUmayri's location in the hilly terrain south of Amman and its small size make it hard to connect it with coastal and valley sites (Finkelstein 1994).⁴

When compared with other highland sites in the southern Levant, however, ʿUmayri is somewhat unique. Early Iron I highland sites in Cisjordan are primarily small, unfortified agricultural villages with a social structure limited perhaps to a single extended family or clan, whereas ʿUmayri was strongly fortified, larger than most of the highland villages, and perhaps made up of compounds of several extended families. In terms of the sedentarization process of sites in highland areas, the settlement at ʿUmayri must be seen as richer and

³ A. Mazar, "Giloh: An Early Israelite Settlement Site near Jerusalem," *Israel Exploration Journal* 31 (1981): 1-36, see 31; A. Zertal, "An Early Iron Age Cultic Site on Mount Ebal: Excavation Seasons 1982-1987," *Tel Aviv* 13-14 (1987): 105-65, see 138; I. Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society: 1988), 177-204; L. G. Herr, "Tell el-ʿUmayri and the Madaba Plains Region during the Late Bronze—Iron Age I Transition," *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition: Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries BCE*, eds. S. Gitin; A. Mazar; and E. Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1998).

⁴ I. Finkelstein, "The Great Transformation: The 'Conquest' of the Highlands Frontiers and the Rise of the Territorial States," *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, ed. T. E. Levy (London: Leicester University, 1994), 350-365.

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more advanced (the pottery seems to be slightly earlier) than the other highland settlement sites in the hills of Cisjordan.

The closest parallels to the material culture (pottery and objects) of 'Umayri come from the highlands north of Jerusalem, especially in the region of Shechem (Mount Ebal). Zertal's "Manasseh bowl"⁵ is very frequent at 'Umayri, as well,⁶ followed closely by typical Iron I carinated types.⁷ On a jar rim from Mount Ebal is a potter's mark in the shape of an upside-down "V,"⁸ identical to the marks on two collared pithos handles at 'Umayri. A trapezoidal seal from Mount Ebal⁹ is similar to seals from 'Umayri.

Relation to the Bible

How should we relate this site to the Bible? It probably was not specifically mentioned by name; very few sites east of the Jordan were listed specifically. We can tie no specific Biblical event to the site. But we definitely can relate its settlement processes and lifestyles to those recorded in the Bible, especially the Book of Judges. We will first examine the lifestyle exhibited by the finds and then explore the implications of the settlement process by looking at other finds in the region of 'Umayri.

For Biblical connections, the cultic corner in Building A is the most striking feature because of its religious significance. In many Israelite sites, primarily dating later in the Iron Age, standing stones were frequent symbols of the deity. They were often located near city gates (Tell el-Far'ah and Dan, for instance) and were also in the central rooms of shrines and temples, such as the one at Arad. Because all of these sites seem to have been Israelite (Arad and Dan both have inscriptions clearly indicating this), the standing stones may have symbolized Yahweh. Indeed, Jacob set up a stone for God at Bethel (Gen. 28). Although Micah of Judges 17 set up an actual image of Yahweh in a warped sense of piety ("There was no king in the land; everyone did what was right in his own eyes;" Judges 18:1), the idea of a private household shrine implied by the story resonates with the presence of our domestic cultic corner. The resonance heightens when we remember that both the story and our archaeological find come from pre-monarchic times.

⁵ 139, Figs. 11:1, 3, 5, 7; 14:5.

⁶ D. R. Clark, "Field B: The Western Defense System," *Madaba Plains Project 2: The 1987 Season at Tell el-'Umeiri and Vicinity and Subsequent Studies*, eds. L. G. Herr, et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University/Institute of Archaeology, 1991), 53-73, see Fig. 4.7:24, 17; D. R. Clark, "Field B: The Western Defense System," *Madaba Plains Project 3: The 1989 Season at Tell el-'Umeiri and Vicinity and Subsequent Studies*, eds. L. G. Herr, et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University/Institute of Archaeology, 1997), 53-98, see Fig. 4.25:17-19; many more unpublished.

⁷ Clark, 1997, Fig. 4.25:17-19.

⁸ Zertal, 147.

⁹ B. Brandl, "Two Scarabs and a Trapezoidal Seal from Mount Ebal," *Tel Aviv* 13-14 (1987): 166-172, see 167).

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The four-room house plan is well known from Iron Age sites, mostly in Israelite territory, but may also be found among other national groups in lesser frequencies. The relatively simple finds from our house illustrate very well the types of finds made in other early Israelite villages and towns. It reflects a people who are subsisting on a combination of small-scale farming and pastoralism, as well as a small amount of trade. This is precisely the type of lifestyle which lies behind many of the stories in the Book of Judges. Even at the end of the period, for instance, only King Saul and Jonathan could afford weapons (1 Sam. 13:22). Because 'Umayri was apparently on the King's Highway, where trade and communication were more prominent in the economy than elsewhere in the hinterland of the Canaanite culture, which still existed, the site was somewhat more prosperous and larger than most other highland sites.

Indeed it is these highland sites in Cisjordan (discussed briefly above) which are usually identified with Israel during the time of the settlement. The significant relationship between the finds from 'Umayri and the highlands north of Jerusalem, especially in the Shechem area, indicates at least a mild form of economic and social interaction. Certainly the people living at 'Umayri did so in a lifestyle similar to that of the Israelite tribes settling down in Cisjordan. But were they Israelites? To answer that question we must first examine some of the finds from other sites close to 'Umayri.

Who destroyed 'Umayri so definitively? Can we make a Biblical connection for it? The site was not immediately resettled after the destruction. So far, only a small storeroom has been found built on top of the destruction debris. It dates to the end of the twelfth or early eleventh centuries BC and so existed about 75 to 100 years after the destruction. Were all the inhabitants put to the sword, as seems to have been often the case in the Biblical record? Or was the destruction so violent and the threat to resettlement so strong that any survivors simply moved, perhaps west of the Jordan, rather than rebuild so cursed a site? It is possible to nominate several groups as the destroyers, but there is no clear sign for any of them. I prefer to connect the destruction with 'Umayri's location on the King's Highway, but it is simply a preference. Could 'Umayri have become too prosperous? That is, could they have taxed goods being transported through their land so heavily that the caravaneers and/or consumers banded together to destroy the extortioners and allow free trade, or at least trade which they controlled? In the Bible the caravaneers in this region are sometimes identified as Midianites, descendants of Ishmael, who lived in a group of oases in northwestern Arabia, a region known as the Hijaz. Their pottery has been found in the very south of Jordan and the Araba Valley near the Gulf of Aqaba. They also appear in the Book of Judges, apparently trying to open and control a trade route through the Esdraelon Valley to the Mediterranean. If they could control

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the complete trade route their caravans needed to take, they would profit much more.¹⁰

A Cluster of Similar Sites

So far, we have very few excavation results of early Iron I remains from the central plateau of Transjordan (extending from the east-west section of the Wadi Zarqa [Biblical Jabbok River] in the north to the Wadi Mujib [Biblical Arnon] in the south), except for the MPP region. Van der Steen's list includes some sites that are earlier in LB and somewhat later in Iron I.¹¹ The horizontal exposure of Ibrahim's work at Sahab was hampered by its modern urban setting, but the Iron I pottery from there seems more advanced (typologically later) than ours.¹² Dornemann's Iron I pottery from Amman is difficult to sort out, but there are very few similarities to ours.¹³ The corpus of pottery from the Baq'ah Valley¹⁴ seems to be roughly contemporary to ours (jugs and lamps), but frequent forms at `Umayri, such as cooking pots and collared pithoi, are not published from there and apparently were not found. The pottery in the early Iron I tomb from Madaba¹⁵ also seems to be contemporary with `Umayri, especially the bowls, lamps, and flasks. But standard domestic forms like cooking pots and collared pithoi are again lacking. Of these sites only the tomb at Madaba and the Baq'ah Valley site may be considered contemporary with `Umayri, but the pottery assemblage at both sites is so different, due to the specific functions of the sites, that a serious social connection cannot be strongly suggested at present (nor can it be excluded).

More positively, unpublished, fragmentary, or partial evidence from sites in the `Umayri region is beginning to surface, which may suggest a coherent series of contemporary settlements. The early Iron I pottery from Tall Hisban (biblical Heshbon), especially the collared pithoi and cooking pots, is similar to that from `Umayri (I am in the process of preparing this assemblage for publication with Jim Sauer). Similar collared pithoi have been found in secondary deposits at Tall Jawa, about 4 km east of `Umayri,¹⁶ and Tall Jalul east of Madaba.¹⁷ A bedrock trench at Hisban may have been a moat protecting the site, although it must be

¹⁰ J. D. Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus Belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993): 18-38.

¹¹ E. Van Der Steen, "The Central East Jordan Valley in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 302 (1996): 51-74, see 52.

¹² Personal observation confirmed by Ibrahim, personal communication, July, 1994.

¹³ R. H. Dornemann, *The Archaeology of the Transjordan*. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1983), Figs. 53-60; virtually all of the illustrated sherds are Iron II.

¹⁴ P. E. McGovern, *The Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages of Central Transjordan: The Baq'ah Valley Project, 1977-1981* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1986), 151-163.

¹⁵ Harding, G. L. and B. S. J. Isserlin, "An Early Iron Age Tomb at Madeba," *Palestine Exploration Fund Annual* 6 (1953):27-41.

¹⁶ Daviau, personal communication, November, 1994.

¹⁷ R. W. Younker, personal communication, November, 1994.

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stressed that the conditions there were not at all similar to that in which the moat at 'Umayri was found. I am therefore still hesitant to draw this conclusion for Hisban (suggested to me by William Shea in the late 1970s and again by Paul Ray and Øystein LaBianca in the summer of 1996), because the trench is too narrow (ca. 3-4 m wide at the top) and is located near the top of the hill. Unlike the moat at 'Umayri, it did not cut off a connecting ridge; indeed, the location of the trench is near the lip of the original hill, whereas the moat at 'Umayri is at the bottom of the hill, where moats usually are located. If it was a moat, it probably encircled only a small site at the very top of the hill. Hisban also contained a nicely plastered cistern. Not enough is known of these sites, however, to suggest size, fortifications, or economic status.

Although I must stress that these very preliminary observations warrant no firm conclusion, one may entertain the possibility that the finds from 'Umayri, Jawa, Jalul, Hisban, and Madaba (if we may use the early Iron I tomb there to suggest a corresponding domestic settlement) represent a contemporaneous regional cultural entity. The material culture seems to be very similar at all sites, and they are within about 18 km of each other (Madaba to Jawa). Each site is within visual contact with at least one other (from Jalul one can see Madaba, Jawa, and Hisban, as well as the hill immediately to the south of 'Umayri).

A Biblical Tribal Organization?

I prefer to explain our archaeological finds using a model based on tribal lifestyles, economics and social systems.¹⁸ This is the model already recorded by the Bible, which allocates the land to various tribal groups. The settlement processes by which these groups converted from nomadism to a sedentarized, agricultural way of life saw a very complex series of events that included populations on the move, such as the tribe of Dan, dissatisfied peasants such as the Gibeonites, settling nomads, and undoubtedly other scenarios, as well. The model we use should not be limited to just one of these processes, but should be inclusive of various social processes rather than exclusive.¹⁹ Tribal relationships consist of fluid coalitions that rise, fall, swap loyalties, and come and go; these same processes should be acknowledged as playing a part throughout LB II and Iron I while Israel and its tribally related and very similar neighbors (Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites) were settling the area. At the risk of making an extremely complex picture overly simple, I can try to summarize the process: As tribal relationships and loyalties became more consistent and less fluid through time, groups of allied tribes developed supra-tribal structures which slowly grew

¹⁸ Ø. S. LaBianca and R. W. Younker, "The Kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom: The Archaeology of Society in Late Bronze/Iron Age Transjordan (Ca. 1400-500 BCE)," *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, ed. T. E. Levy. (London: Leicester University, 1994), 399-415.

¹⁹ Also stated by L. E. Stager, untitled response, *Biblical Archaeology Today*, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985), 83-87.

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into nations or territorial states during Iron II, the time of the monarchy.²⁰ Thus, the settlement process was made up of tribes and tribal alliances (which could be called “Sons of Israel” or “Sons of Ammon”) like that reflected in the Biblical literature, such as the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), where ten tribes are listed in the coalition known as Israel.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the tribal group with whom the inhabitants of ʿUmayri and the other sites in the region may be most easily identified was Reuben.²¹ The argument was based in part on an article by Frank Cross²² and on the similarity of the finds from ʿUmayri with those in the Shechem area (above). There are certainly other tribal groups with whom it is possible to identify our inhabitants, such as Ammonites, Moabites, Gadites, and Amorites, but, because of Cross’s paper and the relative lack of finds from this period in the central Ammonite territory,²³ and the complete lack of relationships with the other groups mentioned, the identification that is most likely and most interesting heuristically remains Reuben. This is the region the Bible assigns to Reuben, as well.

If we identify ʿUmayri and related sites in the region as Reubenite, the settlement process of that tribe probably began as early as the 13th century. When exactly they arrived cannot be seen from the archaeological record, because their nomadic existence would not have left remains for us to find. After beginning to settle they grew into a prosperous series of towns, some, like ʿUmayri, with an impressive system of fortifications. They also developed a complex, prosperous culture, more ambitious than their relatives west of the Jordan who were beginning to settle in smaller, less developed villages in Cisjordan. It also makes stronger the argument that at least part of the “Israel” of the Merneptah Stele (late thirteenth century BC) was in Transjordan, as Naʿaman suggests,²⁴ because it follows Yenoʿam, a possible Transjordanian city. The much discussed determinative before “Israel” indicating a “people” rather than a “city” could apply to a group of settlements the Egyptians knew primarily as a tribal entity or alliance rather than a city state in the “Canaanite” fashion. Most scholars identify Israel on the Merneptah Stele with the region of Shechem, because the biblical Shechem stories seem to reflect very early times. However, the archaeological finds from ʿUmayri and region may suggest we should look to the east rather than the west. The close association of the material culture of ʿUmayri with the Shechem

²⁰ LaBianca and Younker, 403.

²¹ Herr 1998.

²² F. M. Cross, “Reuben, First-Born of Jacob,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 100 (1988 Supplement): 46-65.

²³ C.-H. C. Ji, “Iron Age I in Central and Northern Transjordan: An Interim Summary of Archaeological Data,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 127 (1995): 122-140.

²⁴ N. Naʿaman, “The ‘Conquest of Canaan’ in the Book of Joshua and in History,” *From Nomadism to Monarchy*, eds. I. Finkelstein and N. Naʿaman. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 218–281.

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region, and the greater prosperity of 'Umayri and possibly its region suggest Reubenite priority.

Conclusion

There are several ways to interpret our archaeological evidence historically and demographically. 'Umayri could have been populated by an early Ammonite group, but there is very little archaeological or textual evidence to suggest it. The finds from 'Umayri are significantly different from those nearer 'Amman ('Amman Airport, Baq'ah Valley, Sahab); but it should be noted that these differences may relate more to functional differences of the sites. They could also have been early Moabites, but there is even less evidence for that than for Ammonites. The Bible speaks of Amorites in this area; especially famous is Sihon the king of Heshbon in Num 21. But who were the Amorites? If they may be identified with Canaanites (those occupying cities and towns in the valleys and plains as opposed to highland sites) the material culture of 'Umayri cannot be paralleled significantly by any valley/plain site, even those few nearby in the Jordan Valley. This is a highland site and a highland culture that is best connected with tribal entities that are in the process of settling down. The best identification continues to be Reubenite, because there is textual evidence for it.

If we are correct in suggesting that the remains from Tall al-'Umayri and the other contemporary sites in the region confirm the Biblical indication that we should look for Reuben in our area, Dever's assertion that there is no archaeological evidence for highland settlements in central Transjordan from which "Israel" could have come²⁵ is no longer correct.²⁶ Tall al-'Umayri's strong connections with the northern highlands around Shechem tie the hill countries of Cisjordan and Transjordan together, suggesting that both groups were related economically and socially. It is a simple next step to suggest that they belonged to two tribes which were part of the same tribal confederacy. That confederacy was known as Israel.

²⁵ W. G. Dever, "Archaeology and the Israelite 'Conquest,'" *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 545–58.

²⁶ B. Halpern, "Settlement of Canaan," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1120–43.