

HEBREW BIBLE

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

IN MEMORIAM: PROFESSOR YOHANAN AHARONI*

by

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It is now a week since the untimely death of Professor Yohanah Aharoni, one of the foremost archaeologists and scholars of the Land of Israel, and the founder of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University. When one appraises the life work of Prof. Aharoni, a personality of unique characteristics emerges. From his earliest days in the country as an explorer and excursion leader in the Youth Movement and the kibbutz, to the crown of his labours – an environmental study of the Biblical Negev – Aharoni drew deeply upon his first-hand acquaintance of the country, combining it with his profound knowledge of Israel's written history.

Yohanah Aharoni was first and foremost a historical geographer. As he defined this discipline for his students, and expanded the theme in his book *The Land of the Bible*, the study of historical geography is the science of synthesis – a synthesis that may be attained through the interweaving of geographical, historical and archaeological research. This synthesis found its full expression in the personality of Prof. Aharoni, and is the quality which attracted the many students who were to become his disciples, whether they were acquainted with him through personal contact or through his first scientific research, *The Settlement of the Israelite Tribes in the Upper Galilee*. This book was, in fact, his doctoral dissertation at the Hebrew University, written under the guidance of Prof. Benjamin Mazar, his spiritual mentor; the scientific methodology introduced in this work was subsequently developed into a centralized approach to the study of the historical geography of the ancient Land of Israel. His method was based on the collection and study of all existing literary evidence pertaining to a particular region; a re-examination of the historical documentation; the posing of pertinent questions concerning the process of settlement, the political boundaries, and the historical events that befell the region; and finally, an attempt to find answers to these questions through interpretation of the archaeological remains. An

* Dr. Yohanah Aharoni died in Jerusalem on 10th February, 1976. He was 56 years old.

exacting archaeological survey, the excavation of selected sites discovered in the survey, the collation of direct knowledge of the region and its remains with particular historical texts: this was in essence the methodology of Yohanan Aharoni.

During the past twenty years Prof. Aharoni was engaged in research of the ancient Negev. He began his work as an archaeologist on the staff of Prof. Even-Ari in a study of early agriculture in the Negev, and continued with his own independent research of the Negev trade routes and fortresses, eventually devoting his major efforts to the Biblical Negev, particularly the Beersheba region. The two central tels in this region – Arad in the east and Beersheba in the west – were excavated by Aharoni over the past twelve years, and simultaneously, as a part of the same project, Tel Masos and Tel Malhata were also excavated. This study, which was the first of its kind to be carried out in Israel, may be considered an elaboration of the methodology innovated by Aharoni in the Galilee. His unique methodology specified that regional research through archaeological surveys and small-scale excavations alone was not sufficient, but must rather be based on extensive excavations on most of the central sites in the region. This project, which was prematurely terminated, had already begun to bear fruit with the publication of "Beersheba I," as well as blazing a trail for future projects that will follow in its wake.

It is impossible to evaluate Yohanan Aharoni, either as a man or as a scholar, without mentioning an additional quality of his character: his pioneering enthusiasm. In 1953, Yohanan Aharoni became the first Israeli scholar to explore the caves of the Judean desert, in the footsteps of Bar-Kochba. Surmounting difficult conditions, and working with virtually no material means, Yohanan Aharoni excavated the cave in Nahal Hever which he called the "Cave of Horror," as well as the cave that subsequently came to be known as the "Cave of the Letters." The story of this pioneering expedition appears not only in the scientific publication of the exploration findings, but also in the popular book which Aharoni wrote in collaboration with Bruno Rothenberg, *In the Footsteps of Kings and Rebels in the Judean Desert*. The major undertaking of exploring the caves of Bar-Kochba was also begun through the initiative of Yohanan Aharoni, as the head of a small group of students and volunteers in the caves of Nahal Tseelim in 1960. The discovery of phylacteries and fragments of writing in these caves led to the organization of the large-scale expedition that eventually discovered the Bar-Kochba letters and other finds from this period. Prof. Aharoni was also a member of the first archaeological expedition to Masada, an expedition which also included the late Prof. Avi-Yonah, Prof. Avigad, and the long-time explorer of Masada, Shmariya Guttman.

This pioneering spirit also resulted in the founding of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University. Prof. Aharoni regarded this institute

not only as an instrument combining teaching and research, but also as a means of achieving cooperation through the independent efforts of various scholars, both the young and the more experienced.

From the very beginning of his own research, Prof. Aharoni concentrated on the study of the Iron Age in the Land of Israel – or according to his preferred terminology, “the Israelite Period;” his contribution to our knowledge of this subject is of unquestionable significance. He explored the nature of the settlements of the Israelite tribes both in the Upper Galilee and in the Negev. His last work on this subject stressed the antiquity of Israel in its land, and he produced archaeological, epigraphical and historical evidence to establish the beginning of Israelite settlement as early as the 14th century B. C. E.

As an area supervisor with the Hazor expedition, Prof. Aharoni excavated the casemate wall and gate of the Solomonic period, and was the first to date them accurately. His discovery of this same archaeological period at Beersheba and Arad caused him to re-evaluate the building enterprises of David at Megiddo, Dan, and other sites. The Israelite temples that existed from the days of Solomon and onwards at Arad, and the cultic remains at Lachish and Beersheba, turned his attention to the problem of religious worship in Judah and Israel and the role of religious sanctuaries in defining the political borders of the country in antiquity. At Beersheba he uncovered a well-planned city which had been destroyed by Sennacherib; at Arad, which was repeatedly razed and rebuilt, Aharoni determined the stratigraphy and ceramic chronology of the Kingdom of Judah. The particular attention he paid to each and every sherd of pottery yielded fruits at Arad and resulted in the discovery of a large archive of the Kingdom of Judah belonging to this period; by means of these ostracons, found in stratigraphic context, he was the first to be able to demonstrate the development of Hebrew paleography on a stratigraphical basis. The volume of *The Arad Inscriptions*, which was published only a few months prior to his death, earned him the annual Ben-Zvi award in archaeology.

The final phase of the monarchical period was discovered by Aharoni in his excavations at Ramat Rachel, near Jerusalem. The results of this excavation included the palace of one of the last kings of Judah, royal (*lamelekh*) seals, and seal impressions of the Jewish governors of the autonomous province of *Yehud*, the center of which during the period of the Persian Empire was Jerusalem.

The teachings of Yohanan Aharoni are spread throughout scores of articles in scientific journals in Israel and abroad, and are summarized in his books *The Land of the Bible*, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (written with Prof. Avi-Yonah), and *Archaeology of the Land of Israel*, which he managed to prepare for publication only a few weeks before his death.

It is impossible to conclude even a brief eulogy of Yohanan Aharoni the scholar without describing Yohanan Aharoni the man – a man of modest demeanor, a man of the people, a friend to all, who even upon attaining the heights of his scientific career, remained the same “kibbutznik” he had always been, unassuming and open-hearted, the ideal image of an Israeli scholar.

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