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The Ark of the Covenant, one of the most sought-after lost artifacts from the Bible, is said to contain the tablets of the Ten Commandments. In this ca. 1700 fresco by Dmitry Plekhanov and Fyodor Ignatyev, it is being carried during the Battle of Jericho.

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The Bible has engendered many searches. But the greatest hunt of all is the search for the Bible itself.

Many artifacts from the Bible have been lost to the ages, if they ever really existed in the first place. Some may have been metaphors—like the Garden of Eden—while others may have been made of actual, physical, stone—like the tablets with the Ten Commandments, represented in this fresco by Lorenzo Monaco, ca. 1410.



THE POWER OF THE WORD

Mysteries of the Bible—from lost artifacts to cryptic locations—have led explorers and archaeologists alike on great adventures through the centuries.

The Bible was written by many different authors in several different languages. The scribes who committed its stories to papyrus and vellum wrote during different centuries and in different cultural circumstances. The motivations of the authors were different, too: some wrote to warn, some to comfort, and some, undoubtedly, wrote to entertain. Yet despite all of that, there is a curious unity to the Bible that critics and doubters have never been able to wave away. The Bible has power—even for unbelievers—making it only natural for readers of the Bible—even believers—to wonder if the stories are true.

No interview has ever been conducted with an author of a book of scripture. We cannot know if the parables and supernatural stories in the pages of the Bible were meant to be taken literally. Intellectually, we may know that the books of the Bible are full of parables and figurative language; instinctively, we may feel like these stories have more narrative heft and persuasive force if we refrain from investigating them as if they're part of the historical record.

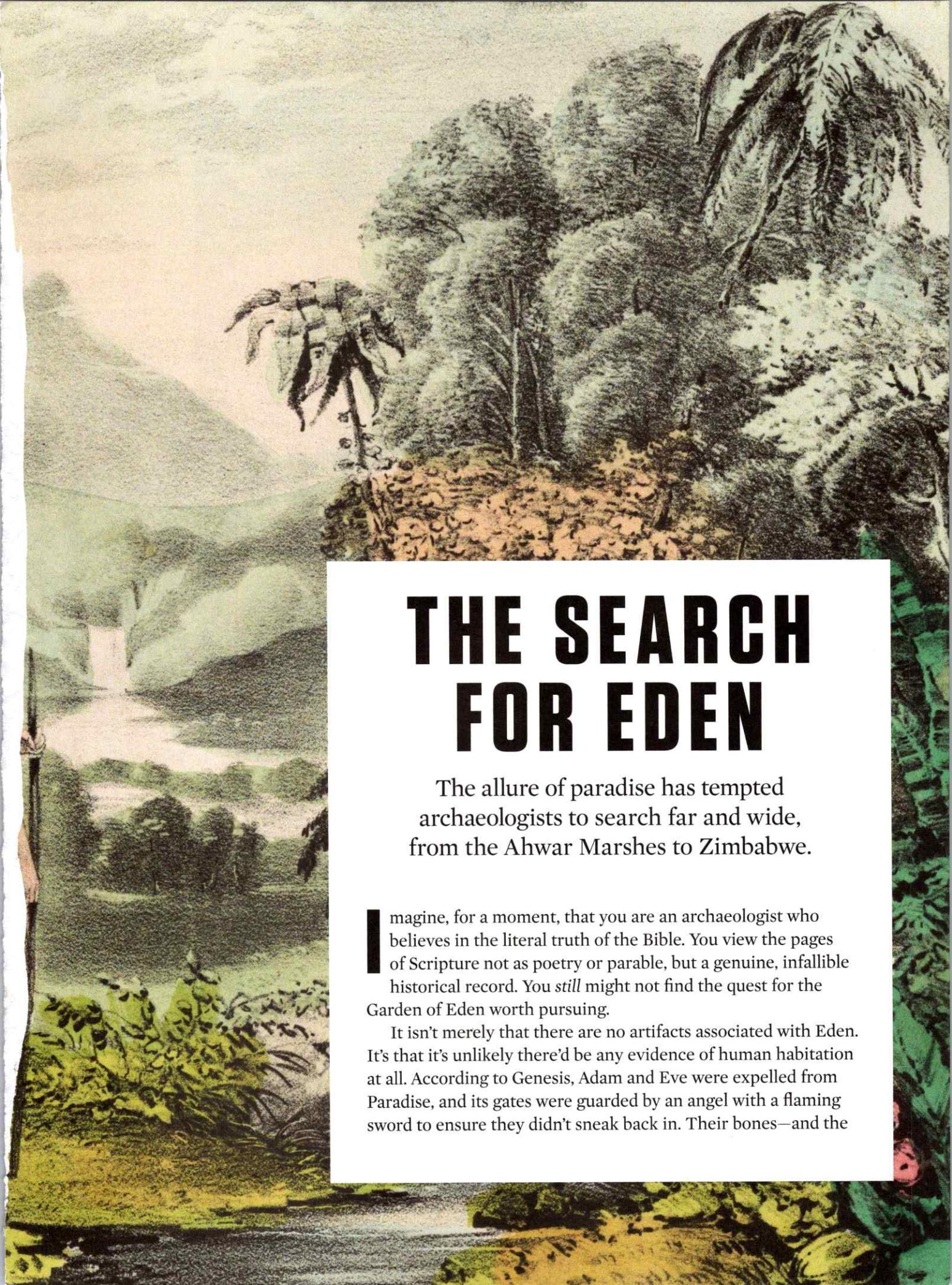
Still, we are curious. Was there ever a real place called Eden, or was

it always a metaphor for the loss of human innocence? Did the Israelites really possess an ark that made them unbeatable in battle—and if so, how and where did they lose it? Did David and Solomon really rule a vast unified kingdom from Jerusalem, or are they better understood as idealized, mythical figures, more King Arthur than Charlemagne? And what of the miraculous objects in reliquaries across Europe and the Near East? Did they have any real association with the crucifixion of Jesus or his disciples, or was that just wishful thinking?

These questions have intrigued scholars, explorers, archaeologists, and many other readers of the Bible. While most people are satisfied to ponder and debate them, others have gone out in search of the truth. Through marshes in Iraq and deserts in Jordan, on top of mountains in Turkey and at the bottom of valleys in Israel, people have sought proof—and counterproof—to some of the greatest stories ever told. And they continue to do so even today. While many pieces of the Bible may always keep their secrets, some answers may be waiting for us out there, in places untouched for millennia.



The lushness of the Garden of Eden (shown here in a lithograph by N. Currier, 1848) and the idea of a paradise on Earth, has held sway over artists, scholars, explorers, and believers for millennia.



THE SEARCH FOR EDEN

The allure of paradise has tempted archaeologists to search far and wide, from the Ahwar Marshes to Zimbabwe.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are an archaeologist who believes in the literal truth of the Bible. You view the pages of Scripture not as poetry or parable, but a genuine, infallible historical record. You *still* might not find the quest for the Garden of Eden worth pursuing.

It isn't merely that there are no artifacts associated with Eden. It's that it's unlikely there'd be any evidence of human habitation at all. According to Genesis, Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, and its gates were guarded by an angel with a flaming sword to ensure they didn't sneak back in. Their bones—and the



bones of their children—must have been buried somewhere else. Those grave sites are antediluvian: they were dug before a worldwide flood that reshaped the surface of the world. We don't have a date for Eden; we don't have a map, either. Where, and how, could a scientist begin the hunt for a place that's untraceable, unrecognizable, and likely mythological?

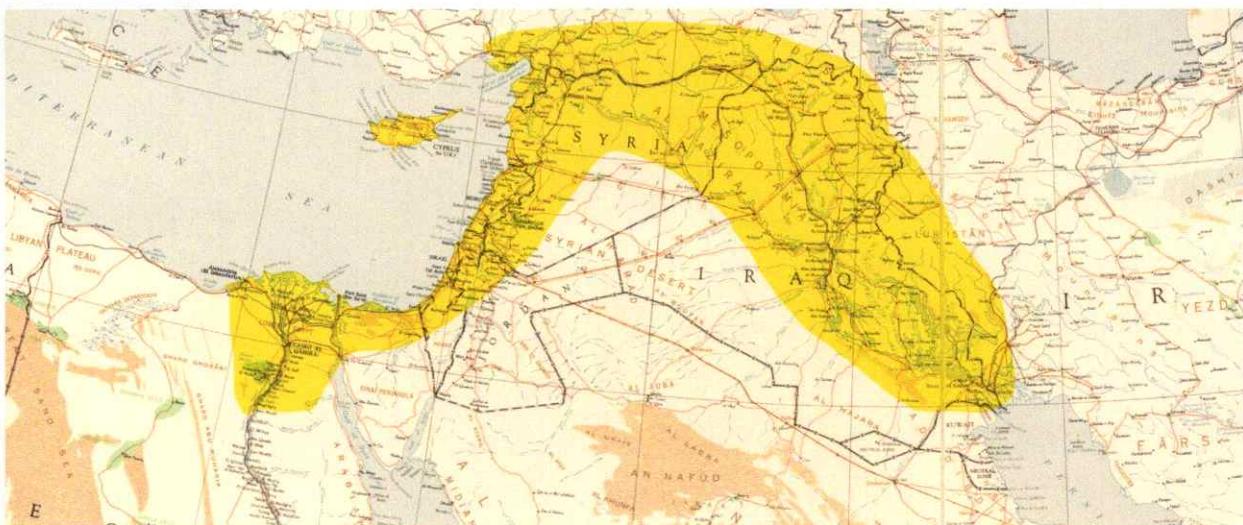
Those who've searched for Eden are not driven by the desire for riches or material rewards. They're fascinated by the possibility of a perfect place: a vale designed by God, unmolested by human hands, and tucked away for ages. What would it be like to set eyes on the cradle of humanity—to be the first to break the divine seal and see what only Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

had seen? For the curious-minded believer, the call of the Garden can be overwhelming. The lure of Paradise has prompted countless archaeologists to dream, speculate—and, in some cases, excavate.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TELL US ABOUT EDEN?

In the first verses of the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, God plants a garden “in the East” as a suitable habitat for Adam, his first human creation. Adam is allowed access to the Tree of Life, bearer of the fruits of immortality. This is the true treasure of Eden. When Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, they’re no longer able to access the food that conferred upon them eternal youth. They

This “map” of the Garden of Eden was created by the German Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher in 1675. In it, angels can be seen guarding the gates. At center are the four rivers that the Bible says originate in the Garden as well as the Tree of Life, which Adam and Eve are eschewing for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Outside the walls, Cain is slaying Abel.



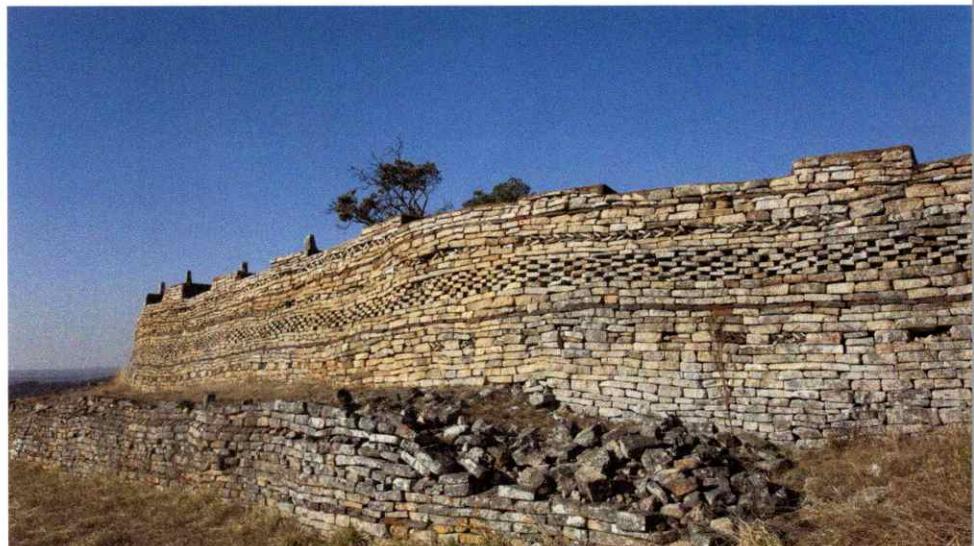
Searchers for the Garden of Eden have long thought it to be in the Fertile Crescent, the source of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile Rivers.

RIGHT: Intricate stonework at Great Zimbabwe still survives from the time of the European Middle Ages.

realize that their lives must someday end—they'll be returned to the dust from which they've been fashioned.

Mythology professor Joseph Campbell tells us that many disparate civilizations have developed the concept of a life-giving tree at the center of creation. This suggests that the Tree exists deep within the human vocabulary of symbols and is perhaps best sought there. But if a tree of immortality actually grew, where on Earth would it be? Does the Bible provide any clues?

In Genesis, the Garden of Eden is the source of four rivers. Two of these—the Tigris and the Euphrates—are familiar to all students of history and geography. These watered the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia, the plains of



modern-day Iraq and eastern Syria where urbanized civilization first took root. The headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are located in the highlands of eastern Turkey. The rugged Taurus Mountains, then, are a logical place to begin looking for the Garden.

But wait a moment. What about those other two rivers? The Bible names them: the first, Pishon, flows through the goldfields of the land of Havilah, and the second, Gihon, surrounds the land of Kush. Because the Kingdom of Kush was located in Sudan and Ethiopia, the Gihon has long been associated with the

Nile. There's no such consensus about the coordinates of Havilah: some speculators have placed it in the Arabian Peninsula, the Caspian Sea, Kabul, the Indian subcontinent, Somalia, and, in one famous case, Zimbabwe.

THE GREAT ZIMBABWE EXCAVATION

Professor Augustus Henry Keane was one of the foremost ethnologists of the second half of the 19th century. Although much of what he believed about humanity has since been firmly disproven, he was, in some ways, ahead of his time:



he argued that the different races of mankind had a single ancestor. This was not exactly an orthodox position during Keane's career; other anthropologists believed that ancestors of white Europeans could not possibly have been created at the same time, or for the same reasons, as nonwhites. Like many of his colleagues, Keane was fascinated by Africa. He became convinced that Havilah—and, by extension, the Garden of Eden—was located in the goldfields of Zimbabwe.

Massive stone ruins of indeterminate origin in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe had first been investigated by Portuguese explorers in the 16th century. But it wasn't until the area was colonized that archaeologists conducted serious excavations of the site. Later, in 1871, the German fortune-hunter and geographer Karl Mauch explored the ruined walls and towers and decided that they must be vestiges of the long-lost and gold-laden city of Ophir chronicled in the Book of Kings. Mauch simply could not believe that Zimbabweans

were capable of construction on the scale of what has been dubbed Great Zimbabwe.

Compelled by Mauch's stories and Keane's theories—and, in no small part, the reports of treasure—British archaeologists and explorers scoured the ruins at the turn of the 20th century. The entire region surrounding Great Zimbabwe was dotted with gold mines—thousands of them, reinforcing the speculation that this was indeed Havilah, the lost land discussed in the tale of the Garden of Eden. Yet after two years of intense investigation from 1902 through 1904, the excavators were forced to conclude that there was no connection between any Bible story and the ancient stones of Masvingo.

Today we know that Mauch was wrong. Great Zimbabwe was constructed by the ancestors of the Shona people native to southern Africa. The city flourished during the European Middle Ages, and probably served as the capital of a substantial and sophisticated kingdom. We'll never know as much

Because of their racist attitudes, European explorers and colonialists didn't believe that Africans could have built something as complex and exquisite as Great Zimbabwe. They found it more plausible to speculate that and the ruin was connected to the Garden of Eden, but time has proven them wrong.

as we'd like about the site, because the Europeans who explored Great Zimbabwe in the 19th and early 20th centuries carried away many of the abandoned city's treasures. What's more, excavators left Great Zimbabwe in a sorry state and did permanent damage to the ruin. It's a cautionary tale, and a reminder that the thirst to see the Garden has sometimes harmed the heritage of other civilizations and cultures.

THE AHWAR MARSHES

Forty miles north of the Iraqi city of Basra, the Tigris and Euphrates

meet. The combined might of the two rivers forms the Shatt al-Arab—a single waterway that flows to the Persian Gulf. This is a region of tremendous natural beauty: an alluvial plain with unique ecological features, framed by wide skies and great fields of swaying reeds. So beautiful are the Ahwar Marshes that they have long been associated with the Garden of Eden.

It's not an unreasonable speculation. Nowhere on Earth do the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates mingle any closer than they do in the Mesopotamian Marshes. Ahwar may have even been the inspiration for the writers of the Book of Genesis. Everything about the region feels still—timeless and holy.

The Ahwar Marshes have not always been friendly to the excavator's spade. Digging in marshland is a challenge: wet conditions degrade artifacts as surely as dry desert air preserves them. The marshes of Iraq have been

battered by recent history: some of the deadliest fighting of the Iran-Iraq War took place there. Rulers in Baghdad—most notably Saddam Hussein, who saw the wetlands as a hotbed of rebellion against his regime—drained thousands of square miles of Mesopotamian marsh in the mid- to late 20th century. Some of what was lost has been restored, but the residue of armed conflict still contaminates the region. In 2016, the Ahwar marshlands were named a World Heritage site by UNESCO, which affords protections to the region, and may help archaeologists discover what sleeps under the reeds.

Some of the most imaginative archaeologists are looking elsewhere. The iconoclastic British Egyptologist David Rohl doesn't argue for a literal reading of Bible stories, but he's convinced that the tales in Genesis allude to real happenings in real places—including the Garden of Eden. In his book *Legend: The Genesis of Civilisation*, he situates the Garden in northwestern

Iran (near the borders of Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan), in the shadow of the Sahand volcano, and identifies the Gihon and Pishon as two rivers that flow into the Caspian Sea. The Garden, he argues, is a shared cultural memory of the roots of Near Eastern civilization, which, in his opinion, spilled over from the Zagros Mountains and into the Fertile Crescent.

GÖBEKLI TEPE

Is Rohl on to something? The highlands of Iran and Anatolia do seem to hold profound secrets about the origins of culture and the winding course of human history. In 1996, the late German archaeologist Klaus Schmidt made an astonishing discovery on a flat plateau north of the Turkish city of Urfa, and scientists are still grappling with the transformative implications of his excavation there.

At Göbekli Tepe ("Potbelly Hill"), Schmidt and his team unearthed a series of megaliths,

Egyptologist David Rohl argued that the Gihon and Pishon Rivers from the Garden of Eden flowed through northwestern Iran, down from the Zagros Mountains.





The Göbekli Tepe ruins are older than pottery and even the wheel, making their construction a profound mystery. Could the site have been a tribute to an Eden located in the mountains to the north?

The megaliths of the Göbekli Tepe are over 11,000 years old, 6,000 years older than the oldest Egyptian pyramid.

gigantic stones that had been hidden beneath the Anatolian dust. These great pillars—many of which are festooned with animal reliefs carved into the stone—supported a prehistoric structure of staggering size. When Schmidt dated the Göbekli Tepe stones, he found that they were older than he imagined: older than agriculture, older than pottery or metalworking, older than writing, older than the wheel.

We now know that an impressive building stood at Göbekli Tepe at least 11,000 years before the modern

era. To put this in perspective, the Egyptian pyramids, venerable and seemingly eternal, are newcomers compared to the Göbekli site. Archaeologists still don't agree about how the pyramids were made; Göbekli Tepe offers a far deeper riddle. Hunter-gatherer societies aren't supposed to have had the sophistication, organization, or knowledge to construct great buildings. How did nomads erect an imposing stone structure in the days before animal domestication? How were the 20-ton pillars moved?

How were the workers—and there must have been many—fed and housed? What was the purpose of the megaliths?

Schmidt believed that the structure was a temple of a sort—a sanctuary and gathering place for Stone Age humans. It may also have been a place of cultural experimentation during the early stages of plant cultivation. Ancient Sumerians believed that arts and agriculture came to them from the mystic mountains—that these marks of civilization were brought from an Edenic paradise in the north.

The Fall of Man, then, might be understood as a descent from the freedom of a nomadic lifestyle to the settled, hierarchical drudgery of an urbanized society based around agriculture and centralized authority. Our collective memory of Eden might be a dim, idealized recollection of a long morning in human history when life was free, food was readily available, and there were no kings telling people what to do. Göbekli Tepe is our proof that at least some of those hunter-gatherers had the wherewithal to achieve greatness. ■

BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Oldest Humans

The biblical story of the Garden of Eden was likely composed 3,000 or so years ago. Its author probably lived in the Kingdom of Judah before its destruction by Babylonian invaders. His (or her) geographical scope was far narrower than ours: the land beyond the Levant (the coastal lands of Asia Minor and Syria) was, to the writer, a great mystery, hinted at in other texts and spoken of by travelers, but never diligently mapped. It isn't surprising, then, that the Bible places the cradle of creation at the source of the Tigris and Euphrates. That was, for all intents and purposes, the very edge of the world.

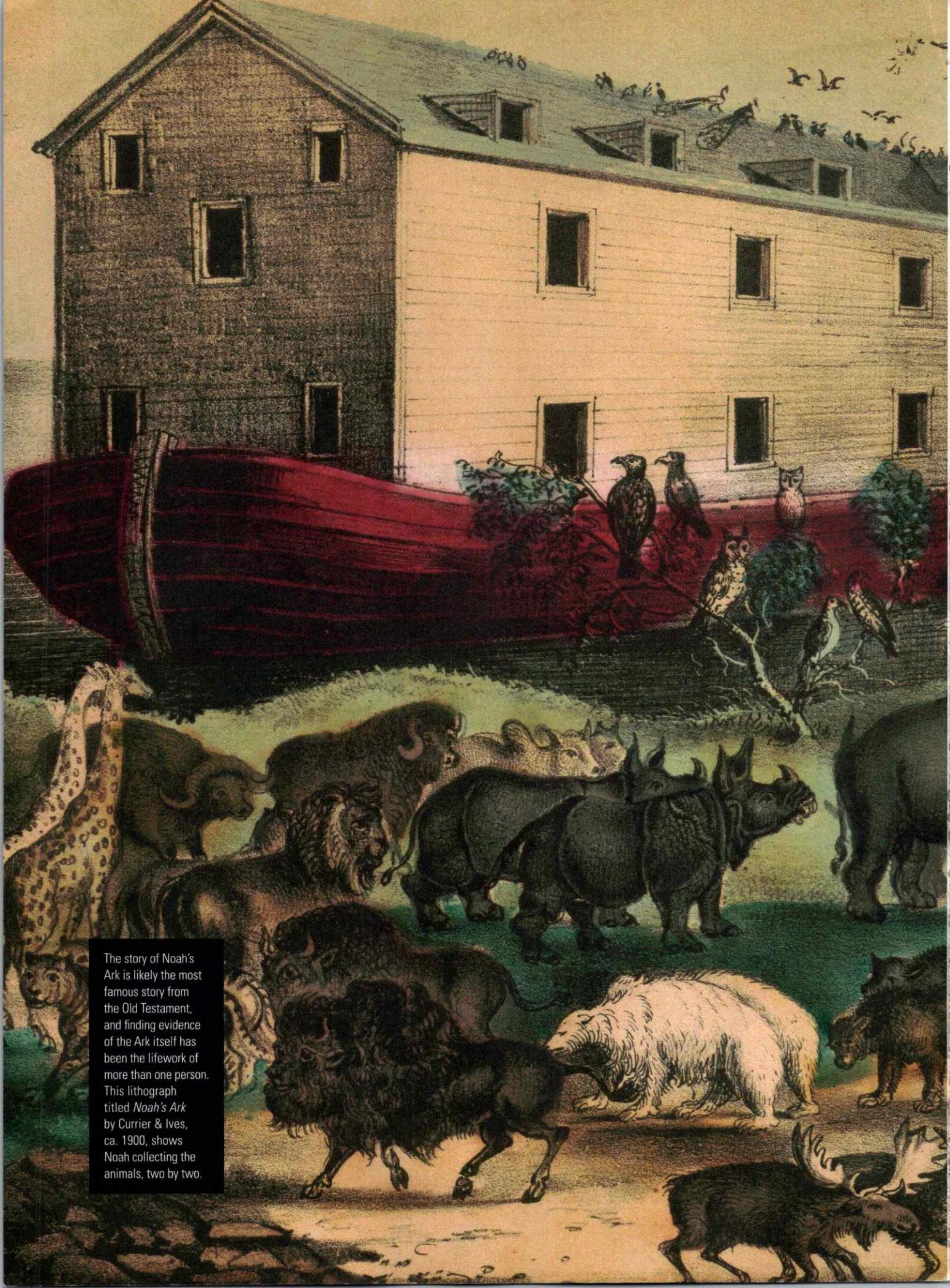
The fossil record casts a wider net. It demonstrates that our hominid ancestors were residents of the Great Rift Valley of Africa 1 million years ago. Archaic humans developed first on the African continent and migrated across the globe from there. In order to square the biblical account of the Garden with the consensus opinion of modern scientists, Eden must be located somewhere near the Rift.

But where? Contemporary excavations complicate the picture.

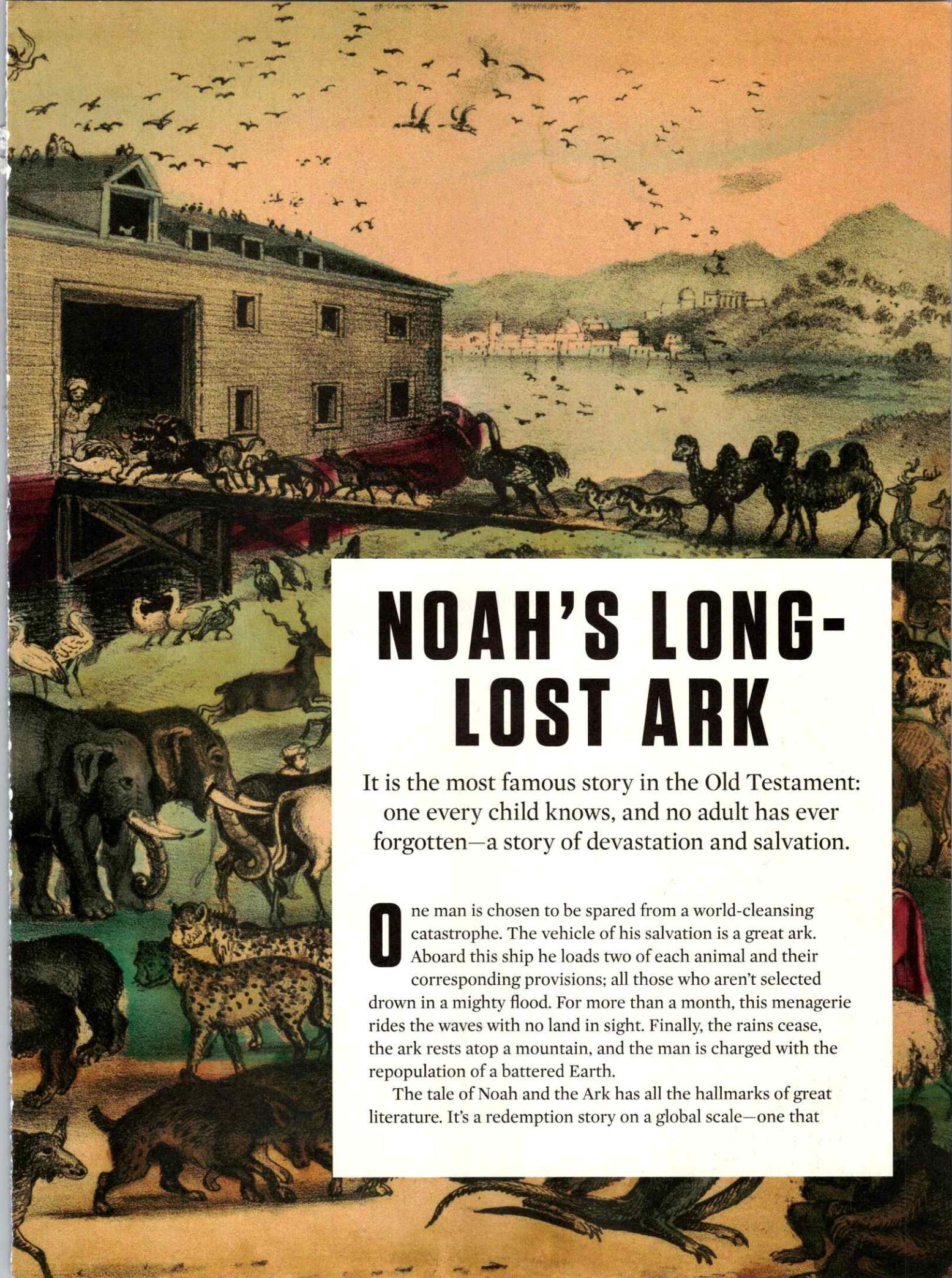
At the ancient Jebel Irhoud cave in Morocco, which has been the site of intense investigation since its discovery in 1960, archaeologists recently unearthed the remains of five humans—*Homo sapiens*, just like us. When the bones were dated, the scientists were stunned to learn that they were more than 300,000 years old. That's more than 100,000 years older than the *Homo sapiens* fossils found thousands of miles away in the Great Rift Valley. The revelations at Jebel Irhoud upended the evolutionary timeline, and suggested that evolution happened on a broader geological and temporal scale than scientists realized. To put it more poetically, we might say that the Garden of Eden was the size of the entire African continent.

The remains of *Homo sapiens* found in the cave at Jebel Irhoud in Morocco predate the oldest remains found in the Great Rift Valley by more than 100,000 years.





The story of Noah's Ark is likely the most famous story from the Old Testament, and finding evidence of the Ark itself has been the lifework of more than one person. This lithograph titled *Noah's Ark* by Currier & Ives, ca. 1900, shows Noah collecting the animals, two by two.



NOAH'S LONG-LOST ARK

It is the most famous story in the Old Testament: one every child knows, and no adult has ever forgotten—a story of devastation and salvation.

One man is chosen to be spared from a world-cleansing catastrophe. The vehicle of his salvation is a great ark. Aboard this ship he loads two of each animal and their corresponding provisions; all those who aren't selected drown in a mighty flood. For more than a month, this menagerie rides the waves with no land in sight. Finally, the rains cease, the ark rests atop a mountain, and the man is charged with the repopulation of a battered Earth.

The tale of Noah and the Ark has all the hallmarks of great literature. It's a redemption story on a global scale—one that

Mount Ararat in Turkey, seen here with a replica of Noah's Ark, has long been associated with the presumed landing place of the Ark.



strikes an uneasy but aesthetically pleasing balance between homespun warmth (animals in pairs!) and apocalyptic violence. Noah is a perfect fantasy figure: he is singled out among all men by God, his Father, for salvation during a time of worldwide punishment. After enduring a horrific ordeal, he is amply rewarded. Noah becomes, in effect, a second Adam, emergent from a womblike boat and free to refashion humanity in his image.

Scientists believe there are more than 8 million species of animals on Earth. An ark capable of containing that much biodiversity had to have been large indeed. The Book of Genesis does provide specific dimensions for the ship: it was approximately 450 feet long. That isn't much bigger than a modern luxury yacht, but considerably larger than the Mesopotamian river crafts that the author of the Noah story would likely have been familiar with. Even after protracted exposure to the elements, a ship like that would not degrade quickly. It would be likely to leave evidence of its grounding somewhere on Earth's surface. Their imaginations fired by the vivid imagery of Genesis, explorers have searched for centuries for any trace of the

boat that is said to have carried the ancestors of every living thing on Earth.

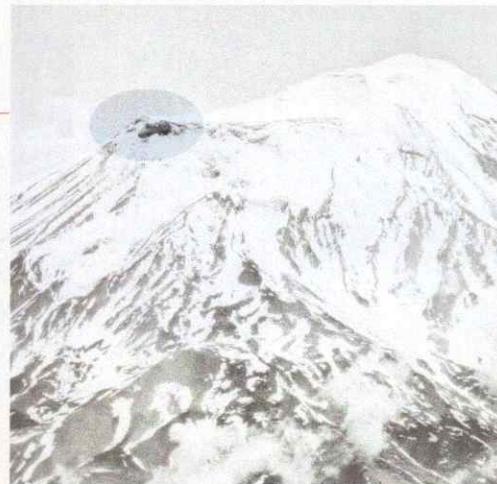
ARARAT: A STARTING PLACE

Many of the best-known stories from the early chapters of Genesis are stingy with geographical detail. Not so for Noah and the Ark: we're told in chapter 8 that the long journey atop the world-sea came to an end in the mountains of Ararat. Unfortunately, most scholars believe that Ararat refers to a region—and a rather wide and rugged one, at that—rather than any specific peak. There exists a famous stratovolcano in the far

east of Turkey called Ararat, and adventurers have long scaled its slopes in search of the Ark. But at the time of the writing of the story, Ararat probably meant Urartu: the historical name of Greater Armenia.

Nevertheless, the association of Noah with Turkish Ararat is a powerful and persistent one, and it has been embraced by religious organizations in the shadow of the mountain. The vehemence of communities of believers has led to misapprehensions. Archaeologist Richard A. Freund, author of *Digging Through the Bible*, visited a site on Mount Ararat that contained the remnants of a ship of the exact

This photo taken of Mount Ararat by the US Defense Intelligence Agency in 1949 shows what has been dubbed the "Ararat anomaly," an outline in the snowcap that some argue may be the Ark but others argue is a natural formation.



dimensions described in Genesis. The frame of the boat rested far above the tree line—exactly where an ark would have settled if the peak of the mountain had emerged from a world of water. Had Noah's Ark finally been found?

It had not. None of the artifacts at the Ararat site were old enough to have been the inspiration for the Genesis story. Closer examination and dating revealed the truth: the Ararat Ark had been built by enthusiastic Turkish monks 1,200 years ago. Freund does not think that those monks intended to deceive. Instead, he suggests that their construction of a replica ark was an expression of extreme religious devotion—much in the

same way that modern believers have built a 500-foot model of the legendary ship at a theme park in the Kentucky hills.

THE DURUPINAR SITE

Eighteen miles south of the Ararat peak, another mountain rises. This smaller prominence is Tendürek, a shield volcano that has sometimes been associated with the quasi-mythical Mount Judi, the “place of descent” or resting spot of Noah’s Ark in the Quran and in very early Christian legends. Tendürek is located in an area of extremes—it’s seismically active, and the weather is often dramatic, too. In the middle of the 20th century, a series of earthquakes, storms, and mudslides shook up the mountain. When the clouds finally parted, the sun shone on something truly uncanny.

A strange landscape feature had long been buried under the topsoil. Once it was fully exposed, it resembled the imprint of a boat—or, perhaps, a fossilized fragment of a boat. The controversial adventurer and amateur archaeologist Ron Wyatt explored the Durupınar site (so named for the Turkish Army captain who first identified

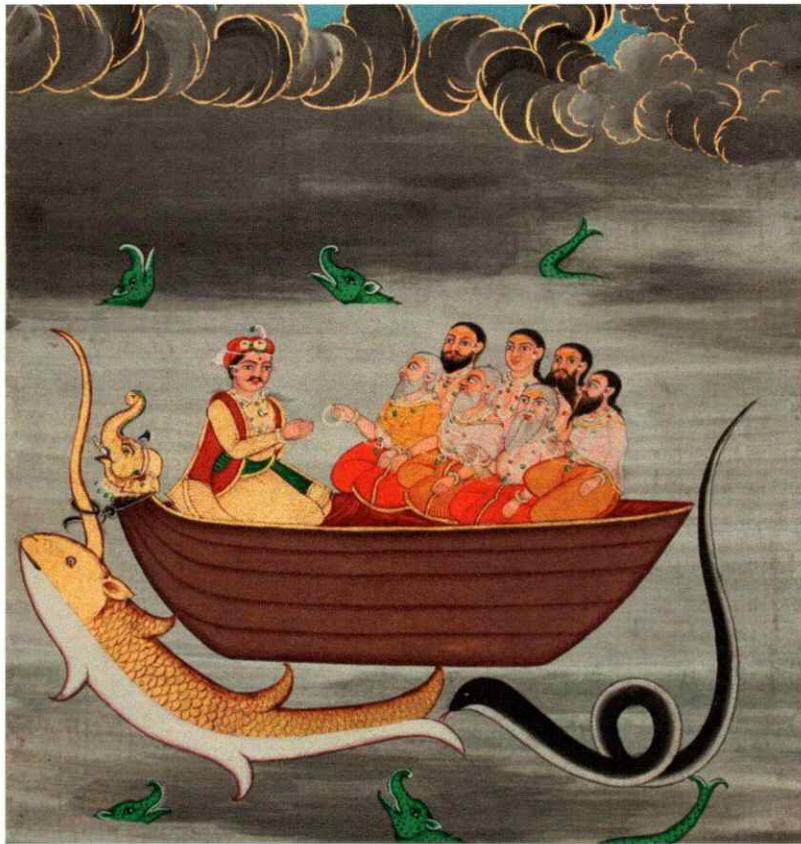
the formation) in 1977. Wyatt soon became convinced that he’d discovered the Ark, and enlisted merchant marine and treasure-hunter David Fasold to aid his investigations.

Wyatt and Fasold discovered an array of man-sized standing stones near the boatlike landscape. Fasold, who shared his story in the 1988 book *The Ark of Noah*, theorized that these were drogue stones—anchors designed to stabilize a ship in rough seas. Instead of excavating at Durupınar, Fasold turned radar equipment on the mountain soil. What the waves told them: the hull of a giant ship was hidden underground.

But geologists didn’t agree. Analysis of the rock formations suggested that everything at Durupınar was of local origin, including the standing stones. No boat was ever unearthed. Further investigation of the site failed to find artifacts that supported the theory that Noah’s Ark had come to rest on Mount Tendürek. While Ron Wyatt stuck with his original story, David Fasold wavered. Eventually, Fasold broke with his partner and repudiated his claim.

Many people were convinced that this boatlike formation found on the volcano Tendürek in Turkey, 18 miles from Mount Ararat, was the resting place of the Ark; however, the evidence does not support the claim.





In the Hindu religion, Manu, the primordial man, is warned by Matsya, the god Vishnu incarnated as a fish, of an impending flood. He builds a boat and, with Matsya's help, saves the seven sages, as shown in this ca. 1890 illustration.

The Durupinar site, he concluded, was another dead end.

A WORLD FLOOD

The story of an ancient flood that wiped out almost all life on Earth is by no means limited to the story of Noah. Similar tales can be found throughout not only the Middle East but indeed around the world. Farther south in Mesopotamia, major archaeological discoveries have placed the Noah story in the context of world history and the intellectual development of humankind.

In the late 19th century, excavations at the site of the ancient Sumerian city of Nippur unearthed a barrel-shaped stone covered in cuneiform inscriptions. In 1918, the scholar George Barton successfully translated and transcribed the writing on the artifact. The Barton Cylinder told a creation story—one with a Tree of Life, a powerful

serpent, and other concepts strikingly reminiscent of the Book of Genesis.

Sumer flourished during the third millennium before the common era, many centuries before the earliest Biblical verses were written. Barton suspected that these Sumerian stories must have been source texts for Genesis—and other discoveries reinforced his position. Fragments of tablets from ancient Mesopotamia tell a story called the *Atra-Hasis*. In it, a single man is warned by Enki, a good god and friend to mankind, of a coming flood. Like Noah, he builds a great boat, seals it with pitch, loads it with animals, and rides out the storm. This tale is echoed in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest work of literature known to man.

The Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia is a floodplain. When the Tigris and Euphrates

rise, it does indeed appear as if the entire world has been engulfed by water. Inscriptions on a great stone that chronicles the rise and fall of Sumerian dynasties tell of a flood that swept over the land at the beginning of recorded history. Archaeological work done at the royal Sumerian seat of Shuruppak testifies to rising waters around 2900 BCE. The geological record in other Mesopotamian cities suggests that a period of widespread flooding may be no myth.

Did the tale of Noah derive from pre-biblical Mesopotamian sources inspired by an actual deluge that swamped the Fertile Crescent? It's certainly possible. But evidence from other literary traditions complicates the picture. Historians and anthropologists confirm that many disparate cultures have a flood story, including some that couldn't have had any contact with ancient Mesopotamians or the Hebrews who wrote Genesis.

Greek and Norse traditions preserve a world flood story, as do Hindus, Australian Aborigines and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and the indigenous peoples of the South American Andes. Many of these stories have remarkable similarities: a sudden, Earth-cleansing rainfall with a divine source, a sole, God-selected survivor on a boat built specifically for the purpose of riding the waves of a world deluge, preservation of



The pervasiveness of the flood myth around the world has led to speculation that volcanic eruptions or comets could have caused tsunamis that flooded the coastal civilizations of the ancient world.

RIGHT: The Barton Cylinder tells the Sumerian creation story, which includes a great flood that wipes out all life but for a single man who'd built a boat and stocked it with animals.

groups of animals, and, after the ordeal, the ship coming to rest on a high mountain.

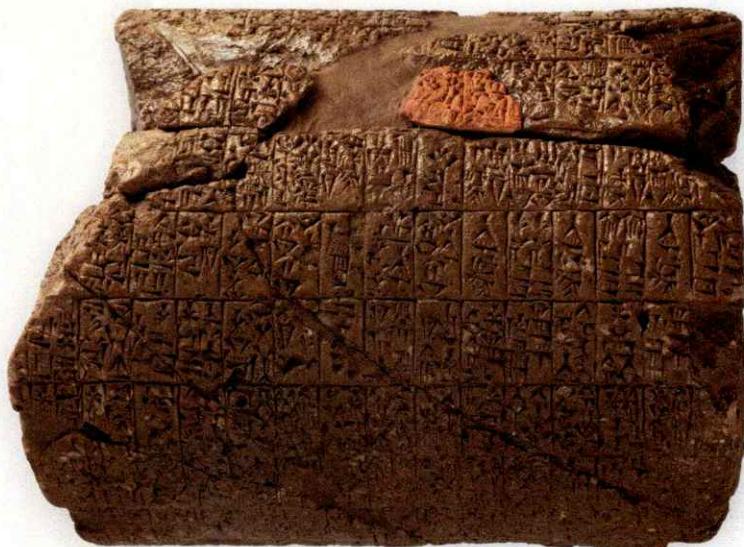
COSMIC THEORIES

The universality of the flood narrative has prompted speculation about a source for the story that precedes recorded history: a true cataclysm on a planetary scale that still echoes in the memory of humanity. Could a series of massive volcanic eruptions have triggered tsunamis that swamped coastal settlements worldwide? Could a meteor—a true extraterrestrial messenger—have plunged into the ocean and sent walls of water crashing into continents? No conclusive evidence for flooding on that scale has ever been found, but the geological record offers

tantalizing hints of dramatic swings in sea level.

Scientists William Ryan and Walter Pitman have suggested that the flood story was a distant recollection of an extreme hydrological event that may have occurred toward the end of the Ice Age. Prompted by glacial melt, the waters of the Mediterranean may have suddenly crashed over the Bosphorus Strait and into the Black Sea at a truly staggering rate: 10 cubic miles of water per day. The hypothesis remains controversial, but if it happened, it would have been a flood worthy of any biblical hero.

There is, of course, another possibility, and it's one that's



likely to appeal to storytellers. It may be that the symbolism of the Noah story and others like it—the great deluge, the protective boat, the pairs of animals, the renewal of the earth—speaks deeply to our common human experience. Tale-spinners may have struck upon these powerful metaphors independently of each other, and the stories have persisted because of their resonance with the trials that all of us must endure. If so, it's unlikely we'll ever find conclusive evidence of a great ark, or even a world flood. But that ship will keep sailing through the collective unconscious as long as people walk the earth. ■



The most powerful stories in Genesis are "just so" stories rich in metaphor and figurative language. These include the stories of Noah's Ark, the Garden of Eden, and the construction of the Tower of Babel.

BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Documentary Hypothesis and the Dangers of Literalism

Who wrote the Book of Genesis? Nobody knows for sure. No original manuscripts have ever been found. Some believers suggest that the Bible was written by God, and, indeed, there's no way to disprove this. But insisting on divine authorship is really only a way of reframing the same wide-open question. Even if the authors of Bible stories were receiving direct transmissions from supernatural sources, we should still like to know who these vessels were, where they did their work, and why they felt a need to write their stories down at a time when most people weren't literate.

The most commonly held theory suggests that Genesis is a redaction of three different sources. This is called the Documentary Hypothesis, and while it is by no means universally accepted, it does help explain narrative inconsistencies in the Old Testament. According to the hypothesis, the oldest material in Genesis comes from the Northern Kingdom of Israel; it's allusive, poetic, beautiful, but sometimes chilly and impersonal. The newest thread was authored by the ancient Hebrew priesthood, and it contributes many of the regulations and codes that the early books of the Old Testament are famous for.

Tucked in between those sources is a voice from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. We call this source J, and it is fair to say that it is the part of the Hebrew Bible that most readers know best. J contributed many of the most vivid, stark, and powerful stories in scripture, including the tales of the Garden, Noah's Ark, and the Exodus. J has a true storyteller's knack for metaphor, pacing, and figurative language: he (or she) is handy with images that stick. If the J material is excised from the rest of Genesis and strung together—something literary critic Harold Bloom did in his lively, idiosyncratic *The Book of J*—some remarkable patterns emerge.

J is extremely fond of "just so" stories: tales meant to explain why

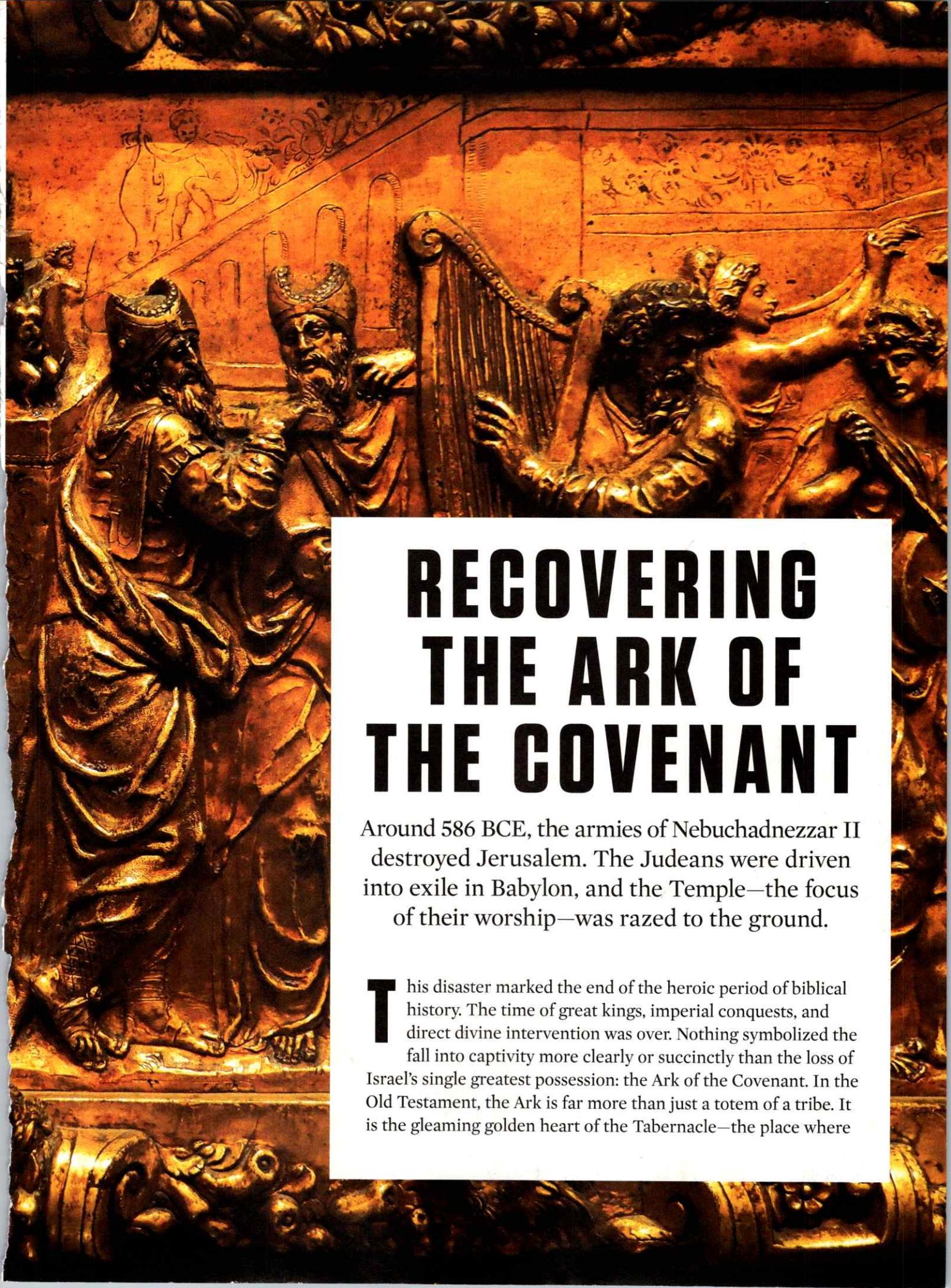
certain things about the world are the way they are, in tight and tidy language that reads like parable or fable. These stories are, by their very nature, unprovable—they're set in a time before history, and they're meant to bypass factual analysis and speak directly to the unconscious. A good example is the J narrative of the Tower, which is often called the Tower of Babel (although it is not referred to as such in the Bible). The destruction of the Tower by divine fire is designed to explain the multiplicity of languages on Earth.

Scholars have hunted for evidence of a real-life Tower of Babel. J, who is not always long on specifics, does provide readers a pair of geographical markers. According to the story, the tower rose in the land of Shinar, which corresponds to modern Mesopotamia. Then there is Babel itself, which is the place-name given to the site of the disaster. Babel is most likely related to Babylon, the seat of the ancient empire that dominated Mesopotamia during the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE.

The sun-warmed ruins of Babylon still rest on the Mesopotamian floodplain, 50 miles south of Baghdad. Excavations at Babylon have unearthed wondrous things, including the blue-bricked Ishtar Gate, a marvel of ancient architecture that dates from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. But archaeologists have not been able to find any evidence of a tower akin to the one described in Genesis—and, in a way, it is a good thing for the Bible that they haven't. If the tower story is a factual account of a real occurrence, then the reverberations of its crash don't echo too far beyond a specific historical moment in a now-lost city. If the tower is a metaphor, as most critics and scientists believe it is, then it is a parable about ambition, presumption, and the dangers of centralization of power that speaks to all human beings throughout time.



This 16th-century brass relief by Vergara from the Santa Iglesia Catedral Primada de Toledo in Spain depicts the Israelites carrying the Ark of the Covenant.



RECOVERING THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

Around 586 BCE, the armies of Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed Jerusalem. The Judeans were driven into exile in Babylon, and the Temple—the focus of their worship—was razed to the ground.

This disaster marked the end of the heroic period of biblical history. The time of great kings, imperial conquests, and direct divine intervention was over. Nothing symbolized the fall into captivity more clearly or succinctly than the loss of Israel's single greatest possession: the Ark of the Covenant. In the Old Testament, the Ark is far more than just a totem of a tribe. It is the gleaming golden heart of the Tabernacle—the place where

the priests met God face to face. According to tradition, the Ark contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, plus artifacts of great patriarchs and priests. If the Ark is as it is described in the Bible, its recovery would be of inestimable value to historians, theologians, believers, and treasure-hunters alike.

The quest for the Ark has consumed archaeologists—both real and imaginary—for centuries. But after the Babylonian conquest, the trail went ice-cold. No evidence of this astonishing artifact has ever been found. It is worth asking: Did the Ark of the Covenant ever exist, or was it simply a literary device?

Chances are, it *did* exist. Perhaps it was not as it was described in the Book of Exodus. But it seems very likely that the Hebrews did have in their midst an Ark that they held sacred and carried from camp to camp. Our best evidence for this supposition is the Bible itself. The

Ark of the Covenant appears in many different biblical books—including books that were written at different times and for different reasons. Could the authors of these texts really have sustained such a consistent literary invention for centuries? It's possible. But it's more likely that the Ark stories were based on an actual object—one presently lost to us, but which may lay waiting in the cellar of a castle, or hidden in a temple, or buried beneath Mesopotamian silt.

WHAT WAS THE ARK LIKE?

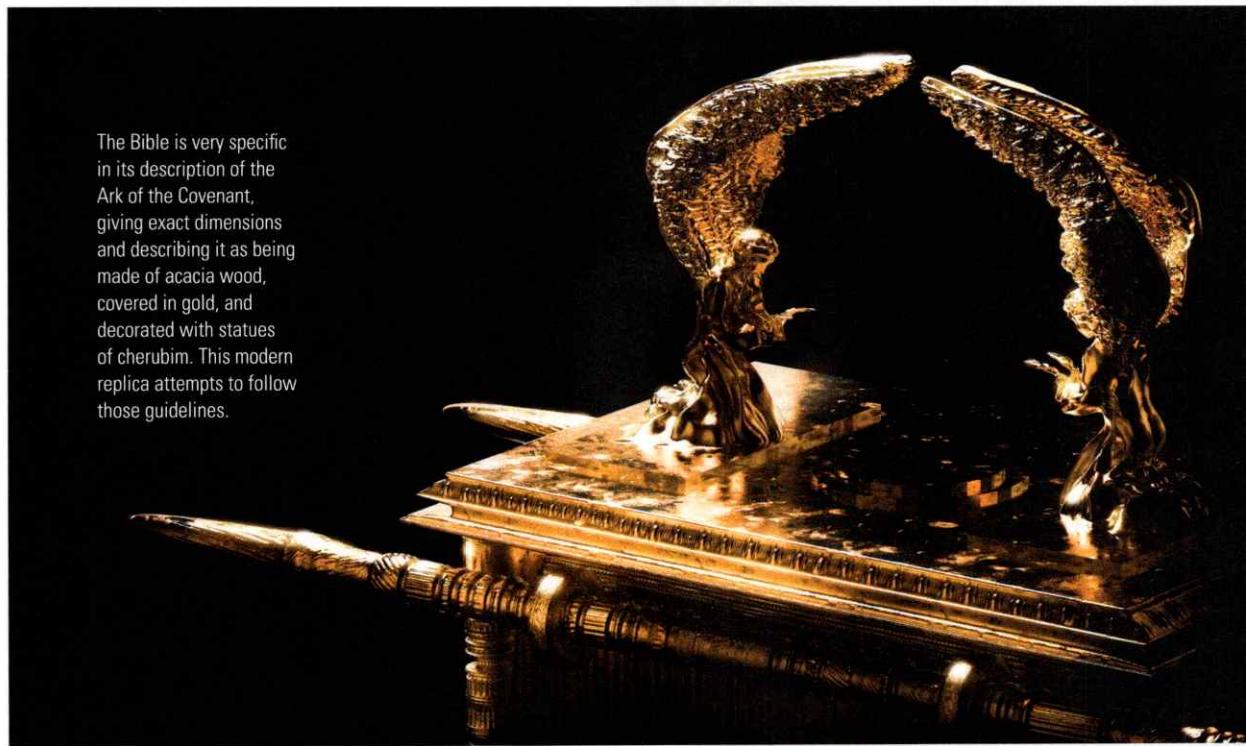
The biblical narrative tells us that the creation of the Ark of the Covenant was ordered by God. He is particular about what he wants: he demands exact dimensions, materials, and decorations, and gives detailed instructions about how the object should be treated. The Ark of the Covenant described in the Book of Exodus is a magnificent thing. It is built of acacia wood, completely covered with gold, and adorned with

two statues of cherubim. God's order comes shortly after the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Where would the former slaves find the materials necessary to make such a wondrous seat for the Lord of Hosts?

Biblical historian Thomas Römer, author of *The Invention of God*, speculates that the Ark carried by the Hebrews might have had a more modest, prosaic appearance. The Ark was not without historical precedent or analogue. Many Near Eastern tribes carried sacred boxes filled with holy stones or bones of ancestors, and these would often be brought to the battlefield to provide spiritual assistance for warriors. The Ark of the Covenant represented in Exodus may be an idealized version of the original article—one that has been embellished and burnished to a golden shine by biblical storytellers.

Römer has been one of the participants in the ongoing excavation at Kiriath-Jearim in Israel—one of the places in the Old

The Bible is very specific in its description of the Ark of the Covenant, giving exact dimensions and describing it as being made of acacia wood, covered in gold, and decorated with statues of cherubim. This modern replica attempts to follow those guidelines.





Some scholars believe the actual Ark of the Covenant was likely much simpler than the description given in the Bible, which idealized it after the fact. A simpler version is shown here in *The Israelites with the Ark of the Covenant in the River Jordan*, an illustration (artist unknown) that appears in the epic poem *Weltchronik* by Rudolf von Ems, ca. 1405.

impressive temple or sanctuary did stand at the site during biblical times. Other artifacts, including shards of pottery, support elements of the Bible story. And if Kiriath-Jearim was indeed a suitable place for the greatest treasure of the Israelites, it's more than possible that the other biblical places where the Ark rested are worthy of closer investigation, too.

JEREMIAH AND MOUNT NEBO

Of all the major figures in the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah might have had the worst disposition. Yet it's hard to blame him too much for his sour temperament: he lived, and prophesied, at a dire time for Jerusalem. Jeremiah was present for the Babylonian siege—the success of which he quite rightly predicted—and he lived to see the destruction of the Temple. According to the Book of Second Maccabees, which

is included in some versions of the Bible, Jeremiah could not bear to see the Ark of the Covenant fall into the hands of the Babylonian invaders. Before Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers could seize the prize, he took it from the Temple and delivered it to a cave in Mount Nebo, east of the Dead Sea, and sealed the entrance.

The Book of Jeremiah does indeed present the prophet as a man of action. He stands up to authority and risks ridicule and bodily harm for what he believes. A dramatic gesture of patriotic and religious significance done in the face of armed opposition is completely in character for Jeremiah. Many of those stirred by Jeremiah's words of defiance have read the story in Second Maccabees, and wondered whether the Ark of the Covenant and the tent of the Tabernacle could indeed have been stashed in the mountain caverns east of the river Jordan.

Testament most closely associated with the Ark. According to the Book of Samuel, the Ark was kept at Kiriath-Jearim for 20 years after the Philistines returned it to the Israelites in disgust, having seen nothing but misery and plague after capturing the prize in battle. The Kiriath-Jearim dig hasn't unearthed the Ark of the Covenant, but the discovery of a buried, 9-foot-thick wall strongly suggests that an

The Book of Jeremiah has the prophet taking the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple of Solomon to a cave in Mount Nebo before the Temple fell. This 18th century fresco by Pietro Gagliardi shows the prophet in contemplation.



BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Ark in Ethiopia

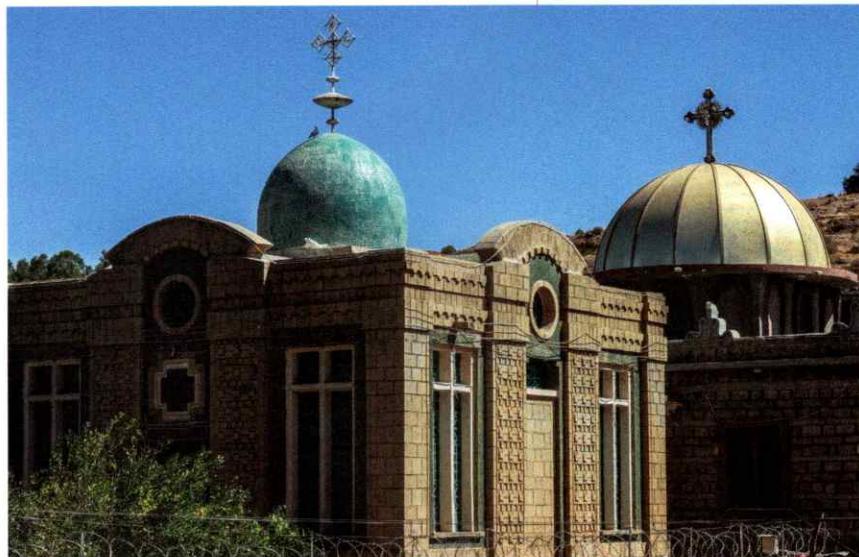
In the small city of Aksum in the far north of Ethiopia, there is a modest but handsome house of worship built by the Emperor Haile Selassie. The Chapel of the Tablet, as it is called, sits atop an ancient network of catacombs—and in those catacombs, according to church leaders, is the Ark of the Covenant.

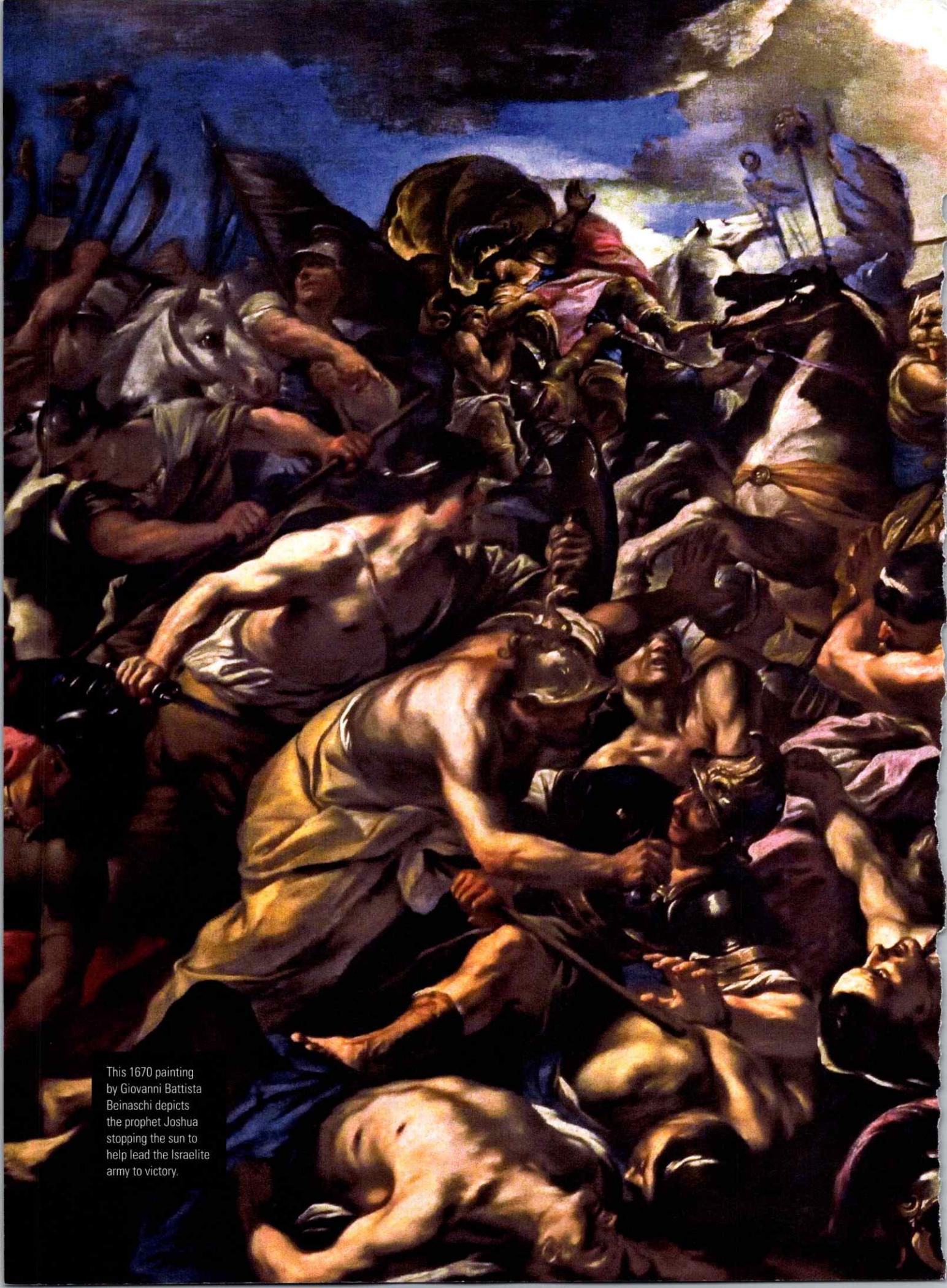
No, you cannot see it. No one can—except for a single monk who has been anointed as the guardian of the Ark. The guardian must be a virgin, and he must never step foot outside the chapel. On the day he dies, a new Ark guardian will be named, and he, too, will be confined to the church for the rest of his life.

So it has gone, the church authorities say, for almost 3,000 years. The claim to the Ark is made manifest in the *Kebra Negast*, the “Glory of the Kings,” a 600-year-old Ethiopian text that traces the genealogies of the biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba—and their son Menelik I, who returned to Africa to establish a dynasty that stood for millennia. It is Menelik who, according to the story, purloins the Ark from Solomon’s court and, through supernatural assistance, secures its place in Ethiopia.

Other places on the African Horn feature in of the story, too: Lake Tana, north of Addis Ababa, was, according to tradition, the hiding place of the Ark for centuries. Lake Ziway, as well, was a pit stop on the Ark’s journey. None of these claims are supported by archaeological evidence, but this has not stopped religious pilgrims from flocking to Ethiopia in search of any trace of the Ark of the Covenant—driven, perhaps, by a wild and unrequited wish that the Chapel of the Tablet will open its doors and share its secret with the world.

The Chapel of the Tablet in Aksum, Ethiopia, is built atop an ancient network of catacombs. Church leaders there maintain the Ark of the Covenant is in those catacombs but only one guardian is allowed in, and he must spend his whole life within the chapel.





This 1670 painting by Giovanni Battista Beinaschi depicts the prophet Joshua stopping the sun to help lead the Israelite army to victory.



This carving of what is likely the Ark of the Covenant was found in Capernaum, Israel, in the ruins of one of the oldest synagogues in the world, dating back to as early as the 2nd century CE.

The treasure-hunter and archaeologist Tom Crotser was one of those inspired by the apocryphal account in Second Maccabees. In 1981, he began excavations on Mount Pisgah, the highest summit on the east bank of the Dead Sea. A few years later, Crotser made an astonishing claim: he told the world he had stumbled upon an object that fit the description and dimensions of the Ark in the Book of Exodus.

Yet when he was asked where it was, or how it might be brought to the attention of the public, Crotser refused to answer. He said that God had told him not to. Crotser took the secret of his discovery to his grave. No other archaeologist has been able to verify or reinforce his claim.

Understandably, other archaeologists are quite skeptical of Crotser's declaration. So, too, are Bible historians. Jeremiah was despised by Temple priests for the same reason he is revered by believers today: he had the temerity to tell the truth. It is hard to imagine that the religious authorities in Jerusalem would have trusted their most precious treasure to a man who had condemned them for hypocrisy. Beyond that, a closer reading of Jeremiah and other books of the Bible raises the strong possibility that by the time the Babylonians had arrived in force, the Ark had already been lost to the Israelites.

AN EARLIER EXIT FOR THE ARK?

With its typical rigor, the Book of Jeremiah scrupulously lists the Temple treasures carried away by the Babylonian invaders. The Ark of the Covenant is not among them. Moreover, if the Ark was anything like its description in Exodus, the Babylonians would have had every incentive to add it to their king's treasure hoard. Yet when Babylon falls to the Persian forces under Cyrus and the treasures of the Temple are restored to the Israelites, there is no mention of the Ark. All this suggests that while the Babylonians succeeded in the total destruction of Jerusalem, they never did manage to lay hands on the Ark.

Where, then, had it gone? The Book of Chronicles provides a clue. In Chronicles, the Judean king Josiah, famous for his religious



faithfulness, tells the priests to return the Ark to its proper place. This suggests that the Ark had been moved away—perhaps during the reigns of other kings whose fealty to God was more suspect. Josiah issued his command only a scant few decades before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. A cryptic line of verse in the Book of Jeremiah implies that Josiah was not heeded: the prophet seems to lament the absence of the Ark in the Temple. The Levites must have felt that the Ark was best kept hidden.

Archaeologists (and rabbis) Shlomo Goren and Yehuda Getz believed that it hadn't been taken far. These two brazen adventurers were real-life raiders of the lost Ark: in 1981, they took it upon themselves to conduct an unauthorized dig on the sacrosanct Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The pair discovered a

lost passage underneath the Western Wall and, from there, continued excavating in secret. Their tunneling took them beneath the Dome of the Rock, the historic Islamic shrine on the Mount, and could have compromised the integrity of the structure. Before they were stopped by alarmed Muslims, they became convinced that they'd discovered the hidden chamber that contained the Ark. The entrance to the tunnel was sealed with concrete, and no further investigations have been allowed.

Perhaps Goren and Getz had struck upon something timeless and precious. But it is worth noting that both rabbis were passionate Zionists who believed that Jews should have complete sovereignty over the Temple Mount. Goren even suggested that the Dome of the Rock was illegitimate and advocated the construction of a Third Temple

The Islamic shrine called the Dome of the Rock is located on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which is a sacred place for many religions.

on the Mount. The discovery of anything related to the Ark of the Covenant would have reinforced the Zionist claim to the Temple Mount. It is natural for us to be curious about what the two explorers would have found if they'd continue to dig, but the Muslims were right to worry about the foundation of their shrine. Before any further digging happens on the Temple Mount, archaeologists will have to locate those rarest treasures: trust and cooperation. ■



CLUES TO THE CONQUEST OF THE HOLY LAND

Joshua isn't for the squeamish. The body count mounts throughout the sixth book of the Bible as the armies of God sweep into the Holy Land.

The Ark of the Covenant makes the Hebrew warriors unbeatable; the command of the Lord makes them merciless. Defenses crumble, towns are put to the torch, innocents are killed, and God becomes furious when the invaders fail to put their enemies to the sword. When the smoke lifts, the military leader Joshua claims conquered Canaan for the Israelites and their descendants. Victory, ordained by holy power, is total.

Gruesome though it is, the Book of Joshua also includes some of the best-known stories in the Old Testament. These include the

scouting, capture, and demolition of the city of Jericho, the crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land, and the pivotal moment on the battlefield at Gibeon when God makes the sun and moon stand still—the better for the armies of the Israelites to slaughter their hapless opponents. These dramatic tales are meant to establish the imprimatur of the Hebrews and their complete claim over Canaan by a fearsome combination of armed might and divine right.

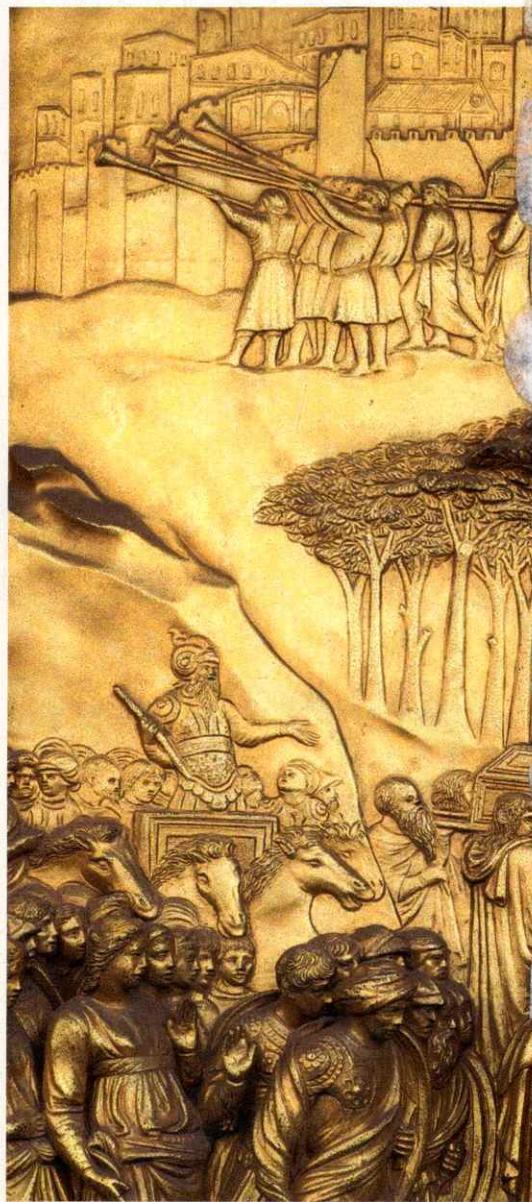
The Book of Joshua is considered the beginning of the Deuteronomistic history: the moment in scripture where the fables and parables of the early books give way to chronological storytelling about the rulers, leaders, and prophets of pre-exilic Israel and Judea. Joshua certainly feels more like a historical narrative than Genesis does—it's a relatively linear account of a military campaign, and it is filled with place-names that survive to the 21st century. If the Israelite takeover of the Holy Land was anywhere near as comprehensive and complete as the Book of Joshua, there ought to be ample evidence beneath the desert stones

of Canaan. Unlike those who've searched in vain for the treasures of Genesis, excavators on the trail of the Conquest believe they know exactly where to start digging. But what have they unearthed?

JERICHO

Today, Jericho is a modest desert town of 20,000 located 10 miles north of the Dead Sea on the West Bank. Nothing about the city suggests historical grandeur or martial drama. But just under the dusty desert topsoil is an archaeological record of staggering richness. Intensive investigations at Tell es-Sultan, a hill on the outskirts of the city, have revealed the depth of history at Jericho. Archaeologists now believe that people have been living in the vicinity of the city since 10,000 BCE, making it one of the oldest regularly inhabited places on Earth.

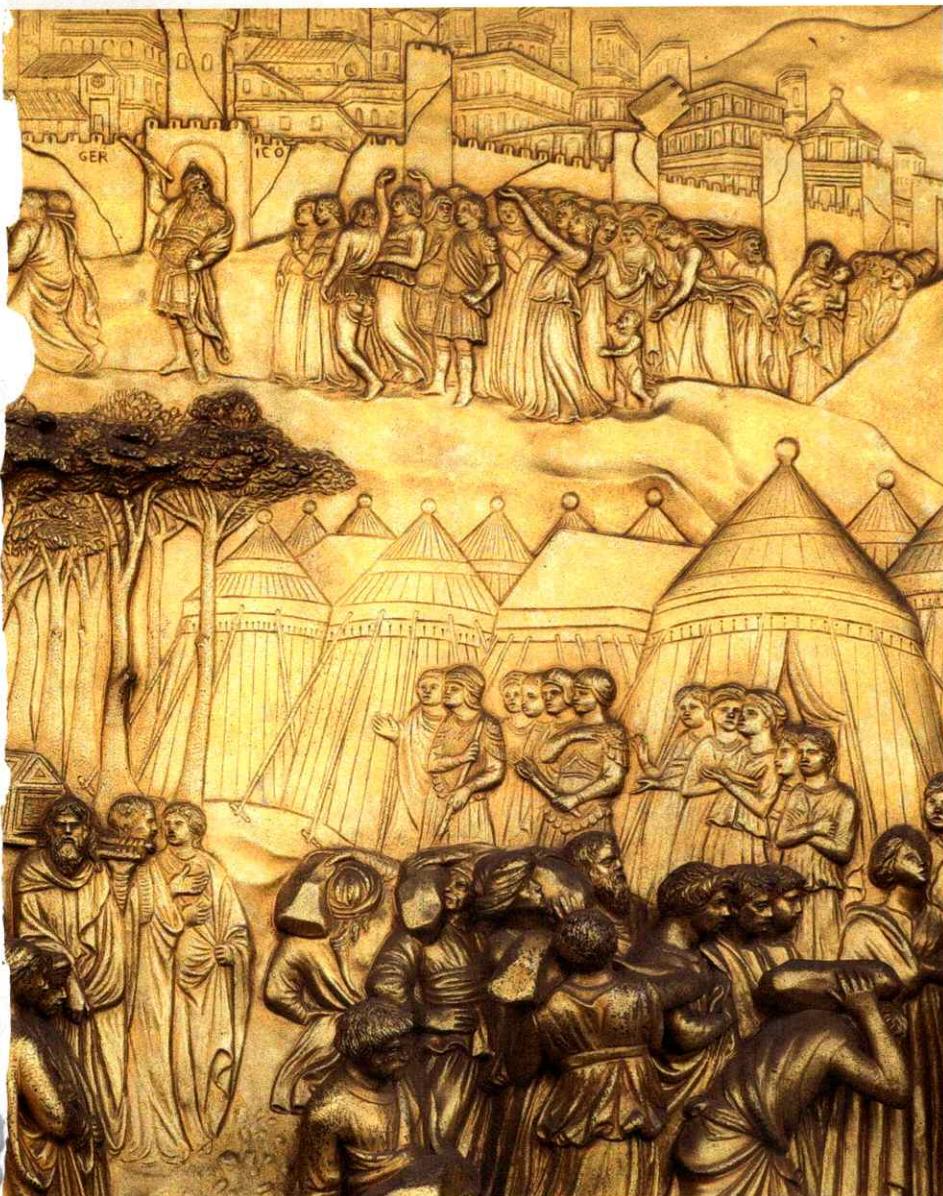
It is also one of the most rigorously investigated. Archaeological work began at Tell es-Sultan in the mid-19th century and has continued ever since. Not all of these diggers came to the West Bank to verify the famous story in the Book of Joshua, but visions of a mighty wall brought low by a blast



This 15th-century relief by Lorenzo Ghiberti from the Baptistry of San Giovanni in Florence, Italy, depicts the Israelites' trumpets bringing down the Walls of Jericho.



Here, ruins of dwellings of ancient Jericho overlook the modern homes of Tell es-Sultan in the West Bank, Palestine.



of Israelite trumpets must have been inescapable for the excavators. And although he didn't know it at the time, a wall is exactly what General Charles Warren of the British Royal Engineers found in 1868.

Warren is a seminal figure in the history of biblical archaeology. He was the first to conduct systematic excavations on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and it was he who discovered the network of tunnels that continue to tantalize and intrigue explorers and treasure

hunters. It was Warren who first made the correlation between the site at Tell es-Sultan and ancient Jericho. He dug a shaft into the Tell that brought him face-to-face with an ancient wall—although he didn't have the technology to date it, or determine what it was or how it was built. He left Jericho without drawing any conclusions.

But others built on his explorations. The German excavators Ernst Sellin and Carl Watzinger were the next to scour

the Tell. In 1911, they concluded three years of digging at Jericho, convinced that they'd uncovered two walls that may fit the temporal and physical parameters of those in the Bible story.

Twenty years later, the English archaeologist John Garstang took the work further. After thorough investigations, he concluded that the ancient walls showed signs of toppling forward. He also found evidence of an ancient fire. It all seemed to fit. Tell es-Sultan was on the precise route that an army would take were they to invade Canaan from the East. The walls of the city must have tumbled during the siege—prompted, perhaps, by divine intervention. Once the protections had fallen, the invading Hebrews must have burned the city. The story in Joshua was true. It seemed only a matter of time before archaeologists would see, perhaps, the gleam of a trumpet bell beneath centuries of rock and dust.

KATHLEEN KENYON AND THE MINIMALIST SCHOOL

Kathleen Kenyon is recognized as one of the most influential, visionary archaeologists of the 20th century. Jericho owes her plenty: her excavations entrenched the city's claim to continuous habitation for centuries and pushed the date of initial settlement into the distant past. She enhanced the reputation of Tell es-Sultan. But she left the dream of the tidy historical accuracy of the Book of Joshua in ruins.

Kenyon's excavations in the 1950s confirmed the existence of walls at ancient Jericho. At least one great battle had likely been fought at the heels of the Tell, too—signs of struggle were captured in the stone. But when Kenyon applied state-of-the-art techniques to the soil and stones of the site, she discovered that



At Tell es-Sultan, Jericho, remnants of an ancient tower about a double city wall that dates back to the Early Bronze Age, circa 2500 BCE, meaning they would have been standing for the Battle of Jericho.

the excavators who had come before her had wildly underestimated the age of the ruins. Garstang and his predecessors estimated that the walls had stood—and been destroyed—around 1400 BCE, the generally accepted date for the conquest of the Holy Land. Kenyon determined that the fortifications were centuries older than Garstang believed they were. During the time given for Joshua's Late Bronze Age invasion, Jericho was a small and defenseless village—a shadow of what it had once been. The story in the Bible, then, had to have been exaggerated. Perhaps it was misdated. Perhaps it didn't happen at all.

Not every archaeologist was convinced. In the years since Kenyon's expedition, her methods, motivations, and techniques have been critiqued by those invested in a literal reading of the Book of Joshua. Yet none of those critiques have ever been able to completely dislodge her studies of the Tell es-Sultan site, and Kenyon's model of history at Jericho remains widely accepted by archaeologists and historians.

More than that, Kenyon's skepticism helped inspire an entire school of biblical archaeology: the Minimalists, who demanded conclusive evidence of historical and scientific correlation before they would accept any artifact as authentic. The Minimalists, whom we will meet again later, do not believe it was helpful

or illuminating to begin with a Bible story and attempt to gather evidence in order to verify. They insist that investigators start with what is provable and build their cases from there.

ARRIVAL IN CANAAN

Ironically, support for the Minimalist approach comes from the Bible itself. The Book of Joshua is not the only account of settlement in Canaan in the Deuteronomic history. The Joshua story is implicitly contradicted by Judges—the next book in the Old Testament. The Book of Judges describes Israelite assimilation very differently from the tale of total conquest in its immediate predecessor. The newcomers to Canaan must constantly contend with their neighbors, many of whom are more powerful—and more ruthless—than they are. The takeover

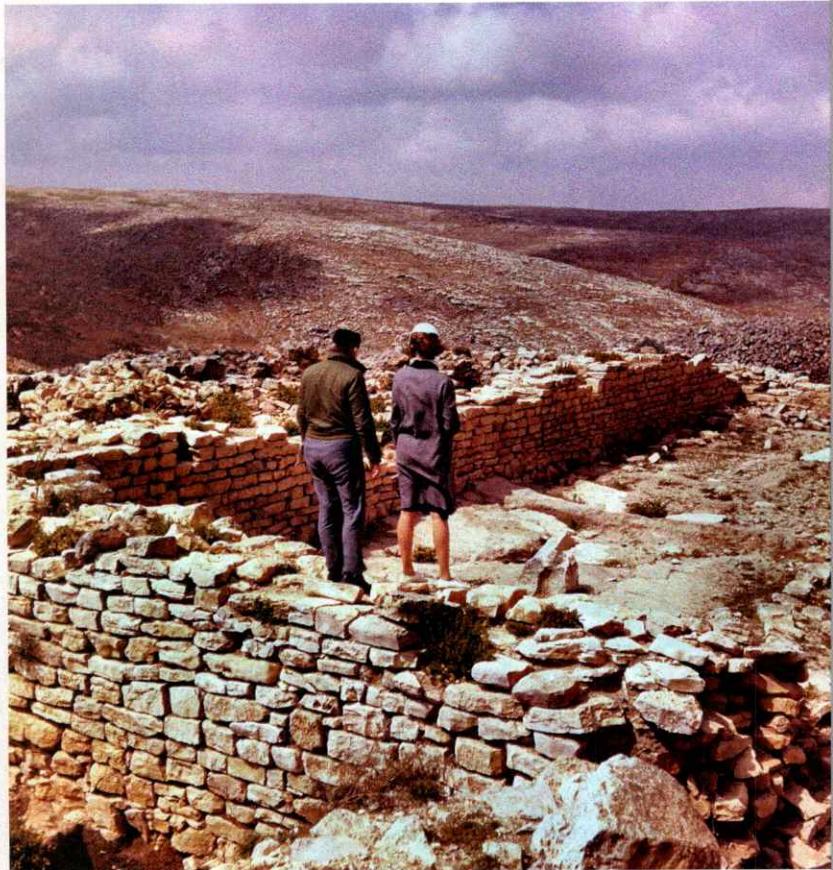
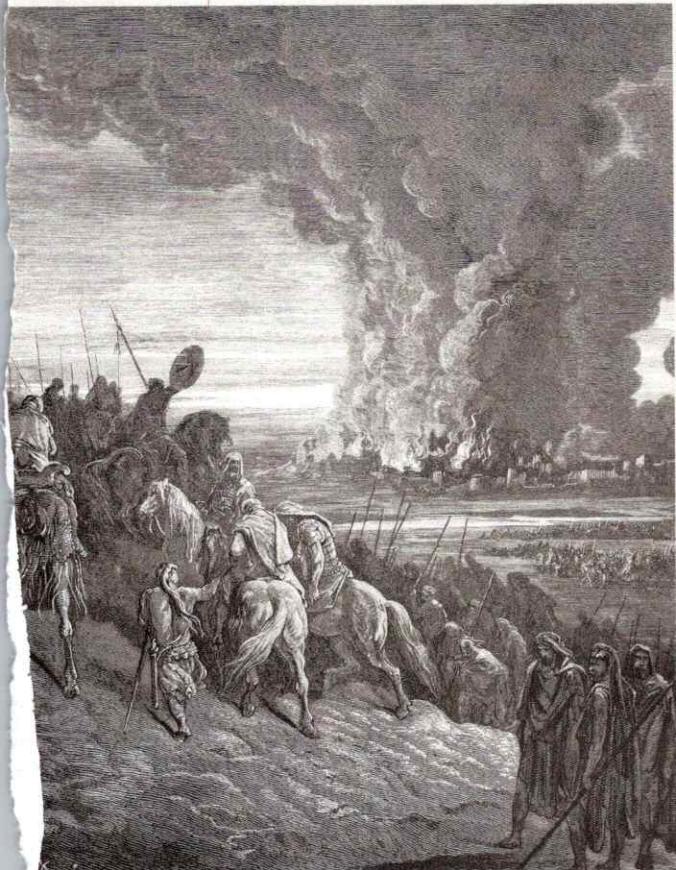
of the Holy Land is partial at best, and, even with the power of the Ark, the Hebrews are far from invincible.

Historian Robin Lane Fox, author of *The Unauthorized Version*, an examination of truth and falsehood in the Bible, agrees broadly with the Minimalist position on the Conquest. Fox notes that thorough excavations have taken place at most of the cities mentioned in the Book of Joshua. These have deepened our understanding of the Near Eastern environment, but they have not tended to corroborate the Old Testament. Hazor, Lachish, Gibeon—these cities have been excavated, but do not bear Joshua's fingerprints.

Biblical archaeologists have not stopped searching. According to scripture, the city of Ai was the site of a graphic God-sanctioned atrocity: the invading Israelites overran the city's defenses, burned

LEFT: This 1885 engraving by Gustave Doré depicts Joshua's attack on Ai, when he ordered the town burned, its king hung from a tree, and its people slaughtered.

RIGHT: Many archaeologists believe that the ruins on Et-Tell are from the town of Ai, which Joshua sacked and claimed.



This photograph from 1898 shows local men working at the ruins of what may be the biblical city of Shiloh.



the town to the ground, hung the king from a tree and defiled his body, and slaughtered 12,000 men and women. There is no modern city in Canaan called Ai, but archaeological consensus has converged on Et-Tell, a ruin near the Palestinian city of Beitin.

Indeed, the tall, crumbling walls and bone-white stones of the Tell are deeply suggestive of a long-forgotten cataclysm. The site begs for the spade, and, for two centuries, investigators have complied. Many of the same archaeologists who searched for the fabled Walls of Jericho also turned their attention to Ai and Et-Tell, including John Garstang. Although smashed pottery from the biblical period has been recovered, it is generally accepted that the fall of Et-Tell (and by implication Ai) occurred more than

a thousand years earlier than when the Bible would place it.

What to make of all of this? When did the Israelites arrive in Canaan in force, and how gradual—or violent—was their arrival? Ongoing excavations at Tell Shiloh may help unravel these mysteries. Shiloh was a crucially important place in the Old Testament: it was, according to the Deuteronomic history, the major religious center of the Israelites before the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was at Shiloh where Joshua apportioned the Holy Land to the twelve tribes of Israel; for hundreds of years, the shrine at Shiloh was home to the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle.

Consequently, excavators have attacked the Shiloh soil with great enthusiasm. Although they have

yet to unearth many artifacts that would satisfy the requirements of a hard-core Minimalist, the haul has been impressive. Artifacts from ancient Canaan mingle with those of the Israelites, the Romans and Byzantines, and the Muslims, suggesting a multicultural history for a site at the crossroads of several civilizations. And although no one is quite sure what the early religious practices were like, archaeologists believe that cult activities did take place at Shiloh during the period of history covered by the Bible. The evidence at Shiloh and elsewhere suggests a more gradual, peaceful arrival of the Hebrews over a long period of time—not as exciting, perhaps, as the great adventure story in Joshua, but certainly more courteous to the prior inhabitants of Canaan. ■

BEYOND THE BIBLE

Bryant Wood and the Brutal Implications of a Literal Reading

Although Kathleen Kenyon's suppositions about Jericho have withstood assault for more than half a century, they've come under withering attack from biblical literalists and inerrantists (people who believe the Bible is without error). None has been more persistent in his denials of the accepted theory than creationist archaeologist Bryant G. Wood, who visited Jericho in the late 1990s. (Wood has also conducted excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir, a proposed alternative site for the lost city of Ai.) Wood reexamined the evidence at the site and introduced some new finds of his own, including grains charred in a Late Bronze Age fire at Jericho. The archaeologist argues that the evidence suggests that the account in the Book of Joshua is accurate.

Perhaps Wood is correct. But if he is, his conclusion would undoubtedly pit the ancient Israelites against modern sensibilities. It is difficult to square the bloodthirsty Lord of Hosts of the Book of Joshua with the God of Love of the New Testament. In Joshua, the cities of Jericho and Ai fall under the *ban*, or *herem*: a divine injunction to slaughter all inhabitants, including noncombatants. This is exactly what happens in Joshua. The invading army

of Hebrews leaves absolute desolation in its wake. There is no suggestion that they have been attacked or otherwise provoked to wrath. The Holy Land is there for the conquest, and, according to the God of the Book of Joshua, the inconvenient prior inhabitants have simply got to go.

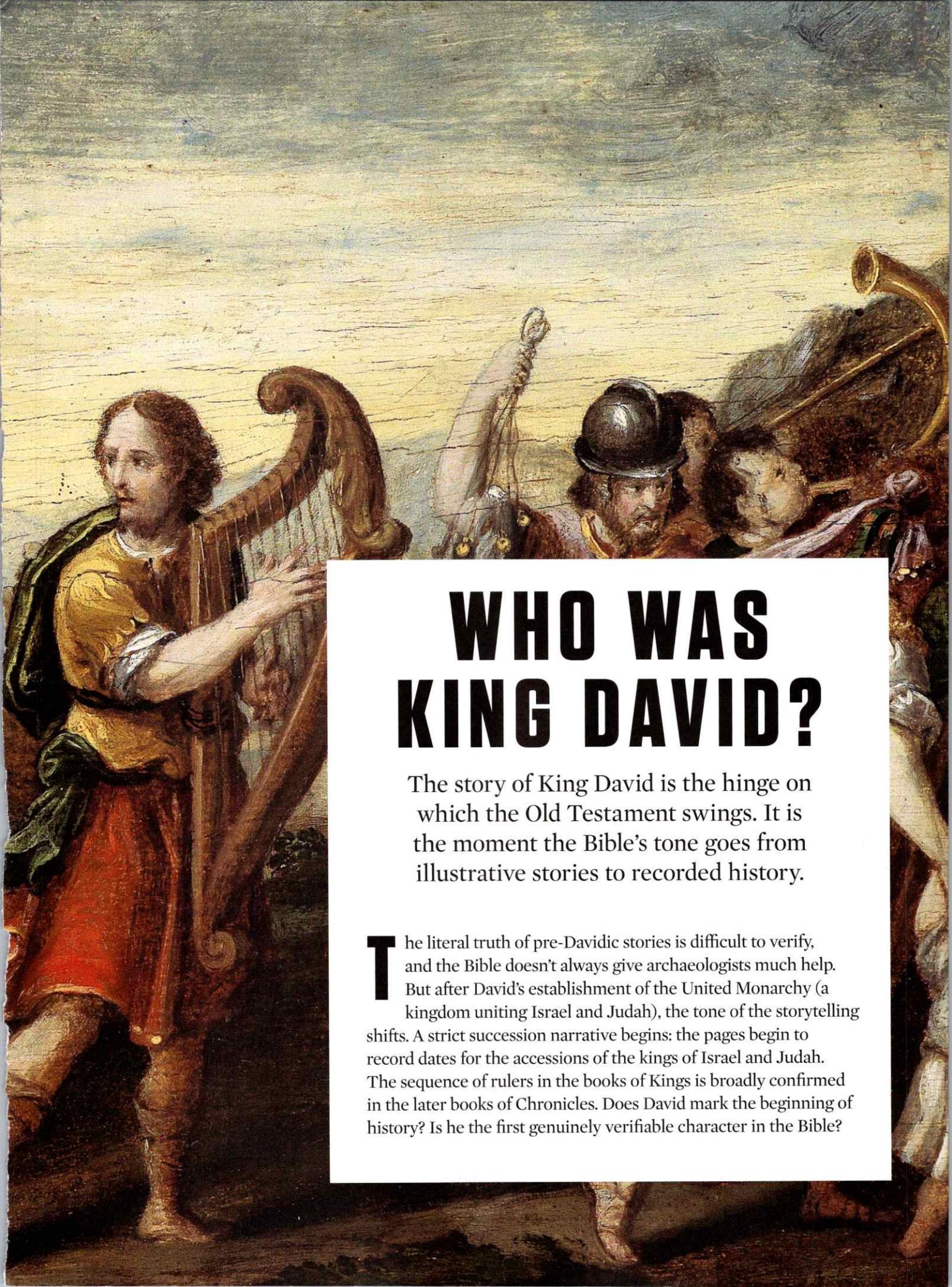
There is no evidence that the Hebrews actually practiced the *ban*. It would be impossible to feel sympathy for them if they did. Most scholars believe that *herem* is a literary device, and archaeologists' inability to uncover any sign of mass extermination in biblical Canaan ought to be greeted by true believers with relief. This may be a case where even the most hard-core literalist ought to be happy with a metaphorical reading of scripture.

Was the *herem*, a divine order to kill all the people of a city or village, just a literary device used by the writers of the Bible, or were those slaughters, such as the Battle of Jericho, depicted here by the 15th-century Italian artist Antonio Tempesta, real?





In this early-16th-century painting, King David is shown playing the harp, a symbol often associated with him, as he leads the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem.



WHO WAS KING DAVID?

The story of King David is the hinge on which the Old Testament swings. It is the moment the Bible's tone goes from illustrative stories to recorded history.

The literal truth of pre-Davidic stories is difficult to verify, and the Bible doesn't always give archaeologists much help. But after David's establishment of the United Monarchy (a kingdom uniting Israel and Judah), the tone of the storytelling shifts. A strict succession narrative begins: the pages begin to record dates for the accessions of the kings of Israel and Judah. The sequence of rulers in the books of Kings is broadly confirmed in the later books of Chronicles. Does David mark the beginning of history? Is he the first genuinely verifiable character in the Bible?



He feels real. David is presented as a man in full: a warrior, political leader, and artist; a great hero who is subtly chastised for cowardice; a paragon of honor who causes the death of a valiant soldier whose wife he desires; a dedicated father who plays favorites and feuds with his ambitious son; a unifier who presides over a fractious group of rivals, prophets, and aspirants to the throne. He is, in short, a fully modern literary character—one with psychological depth and grave faults offsetting his undeniable strengths. David strides through the Books of Samuel and casts a long shadow over the rest of the Bible as he does. But while there is good reason to believe an actual King David existed, proof is far scarcer than most readers realize.

The David of the Bible is a conqueror and diplomat as well

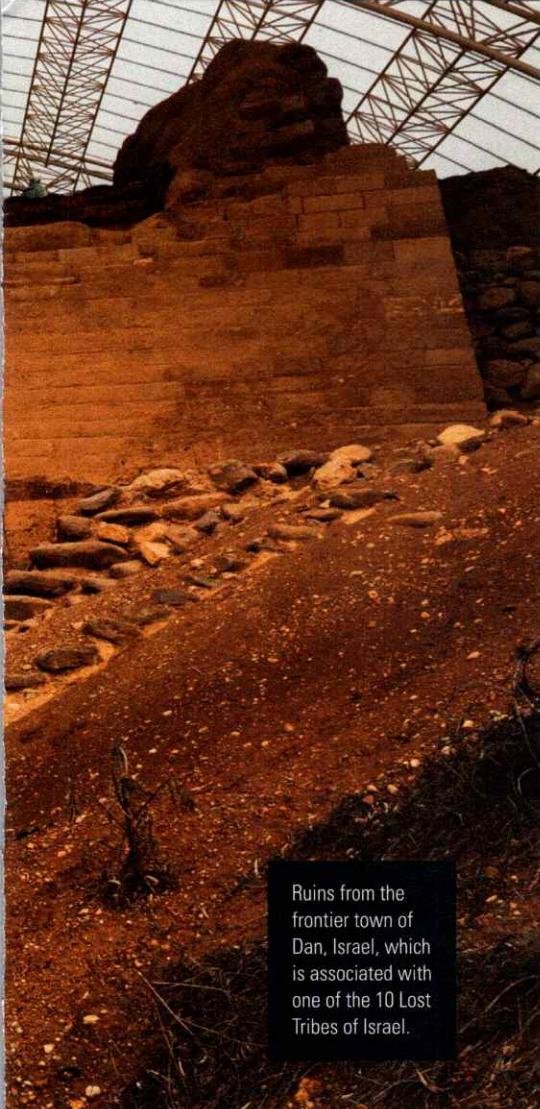
as a charismatic leader. Under his guidance, Israel begins to speak in a single voice: its borders grow, and its regional influence does, too. If a kingdom centered on Jerusalem really did expand aggressively 3,000 years ago, reverberations ought to be present in the rock. For centuries, archaeologists have searched for evidence of a United Monarchy ruled by a just and God-fearing king. Only recently have the stones begun to speak back.

THE TEL DAN INSCRIPTION

In the verdant Galilee Panhandle in the far north of Israel, low Iron Age walls squat on a silent hill. These modest fortifications are the remnants of Tel Dan, a frontier town associated with one of the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel. In the Bible, the

settlement at Dan is a byword for the geographical limits of Israelite political control—the oft-used phrase “from Dan to Beersheba” means the entire nation, much as “from sea to shining sea” does for Americans. Here is exactly where an enterprising king might find himself engaged with those who’d seek to check his territorial ambitions. If the armies of King David really did push against the borders of Canaan, this is where we might expect to discover a sign of that struggle.

Although not every archaeologist is convinced, most now believe that we have. In 1993, Professor Avraham Biran, leader of the excavation at Dan, unearthed a rough block of rock covered with ancient Aramaic inscriptions. The artifact was a piece of basalt—the sort of hard, weather-resistant stone favored by



Ruins from the frontier town of Dan, Israel, which is associated with one of the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel.

makers of monuments. The Tel Dan fragment had been part of a stele erected by triumphant Syrians after a military victory, and later smashed by returning Israelites. The inscriptions on the rock appear to contain a clear reference to the House, or Dynasty, of David—the first verification that such a thing existed.

Written Aramaic, like Hebrew, does not represent vowels. This makes translation an act of interpretation. Some skeptics and Minimalists have argued that the Tel Dan inscription might not refer to a King David at all. The phrase could instead be translated as “house of the beloved” or even “house of uncle.” This is technically true.

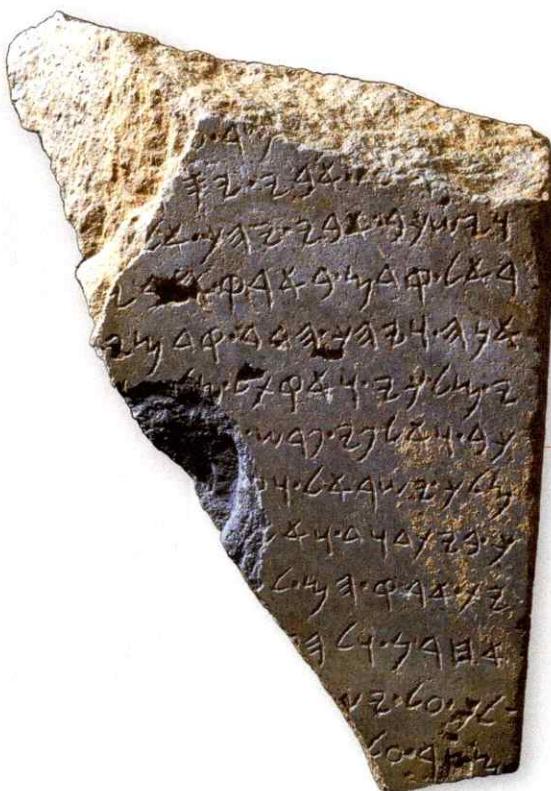
But the stone does support a traditional biblical interpretation. The Tel Dan inscription likely dates to the 9th century BCE, roughly a hundred years after the rule of King David. According to the Book of Kings, this was the period when the successors of David were scrambling to preserve the territorial gains

of their predecessors. The Bible testifies to near-constant friction with the Aramaic states in Syria. “Beloved” and “uncle” do not fit the context of an ancient battlefield anywhere near as snugly as “House of David” does. The warriors of the sons of David would indeed have been in action in peripheral sites such as Dan. The discovery and broad acceptance of the Tel Dan inscription has prompted historians to take a closer look at some other famous artifacts—artifacts that may contain clues to the identity of Israel’s most heralded king.

THE MESAHA STELE

The third chapter of the Second Book of Kings reports a dispute between the Israelites and Mesha, the king of the Moabites. Moab lay on the Eastern side of the Jordan River, and its rulers were often at odds with the kings of Jerusalem and Samaria, so the story of rebellion and the unified response from Israelite leaders isn’t without its analogues elsewhere in scripture. Yet there’s something extraordinary about this story nonetheless. It’s the rare chapter in Kings, or anywhere in the Old Testament, that’s supported by hard archaeological evidence.

The Kings verses are echoed by the inscriptions on the Mesha Stele, a jigsaw puzzle reconstituted from basalt pieces of a slab recovered from the rubble of ancient Dibon in 1868. The stele tells the story of the conflict from the perspective of the Moabites; though it differs in some of the details, the broad outline of King Mesha’s story corroborates the biblical narrative. The Mesha Stele has been of invaluable assistance to Near Eastern scholars: it’s helped linguists decipher the lost language of the Moabites, and it contains the earliest recorded reference to the Hebrew God. Scholars continue to scour the inscriptions on the Mesha



This fragment of the stele from Tel Dan can be translated as the Syrian king Hazael boasting about killing Ahaziah of “the House of David” (fifth line from the bottom).

Stele for clues—including those on the hunt for King David.

In 1994, André Lemaire, a celebrated French epigrapher (a historian who specializes in deciphering ancient inscriptions), announced a discovery. He'd noticed a reference to the House of David, hidden in plain sight on the Mesha Stele, that had eluded recognition by the many other scholars who'd studied the stone. The monument, he argued, commemorated a victorious military campaign by the Moabites in areas controlled by the leaders of the Kingdom of Judah—the direct descendants of David. Here, along with the Tel Dan inscription, was firm confirmation of the historicity of the Old Testament monarch and perhaps the United Monarchy, too.

Why did Lemaire come to such a different conclusion than his fellow historians and epigraphers had? Part of the divergence of opinion can be attributed to the compromised

physical condition of the slab itself. Archaeologists have been able to reassemble only 60 percent of the stone. The rest of the Mesha Stele is a papier-mâché replica called a “squeeze.” That squeeze was cast in 1871 by a daring adventurer named Yacoub Caravacca who penetrated the camp of the local Bedouins who possessed the stone. Caravacca was wounded in the attempt—but managed to escape from the Bedouins, who, erroneously believing that the artifact contained treasure, later blew the stele into 40 pieces.

As ancient artifacts go, the Mesha Stele boasts remarkable integrity. Studying it still requires a considerable amount of interpretation. Part of the line on which the proposed reference to David rests is shattered. Recently, Thomas Römer, Nadav Na'aman, and Israel Finkelstein turned the lenses of their high-resolution cameras on the squeeze—and they suggested that Lemaire had misread



The Mesha Stele, or Moabite Stone, was found intact in 1868. It was pieced together again after being blown apart by greedy treasure hunters looking for a nonexistent fortune inside.



This mosaic of King David playing the harp comes from an early-6th-century CE synagogue and was discovered in Gaza in 1966.

the letters. The inscription, they argued, likely referred to Balak, the Moabite king who entreats Balaam to curse the Israelites in the biblical Book of Numbers. This theory was, in turn, challenged by archaeologist Lawrence Mykytiuk of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, a periodical that has long been sharply critical of the Minimalist perspective. The Mesha Stele will, no doubt, continue to fascinate and tantalize all who study it, but easy answers may continue to elude us.

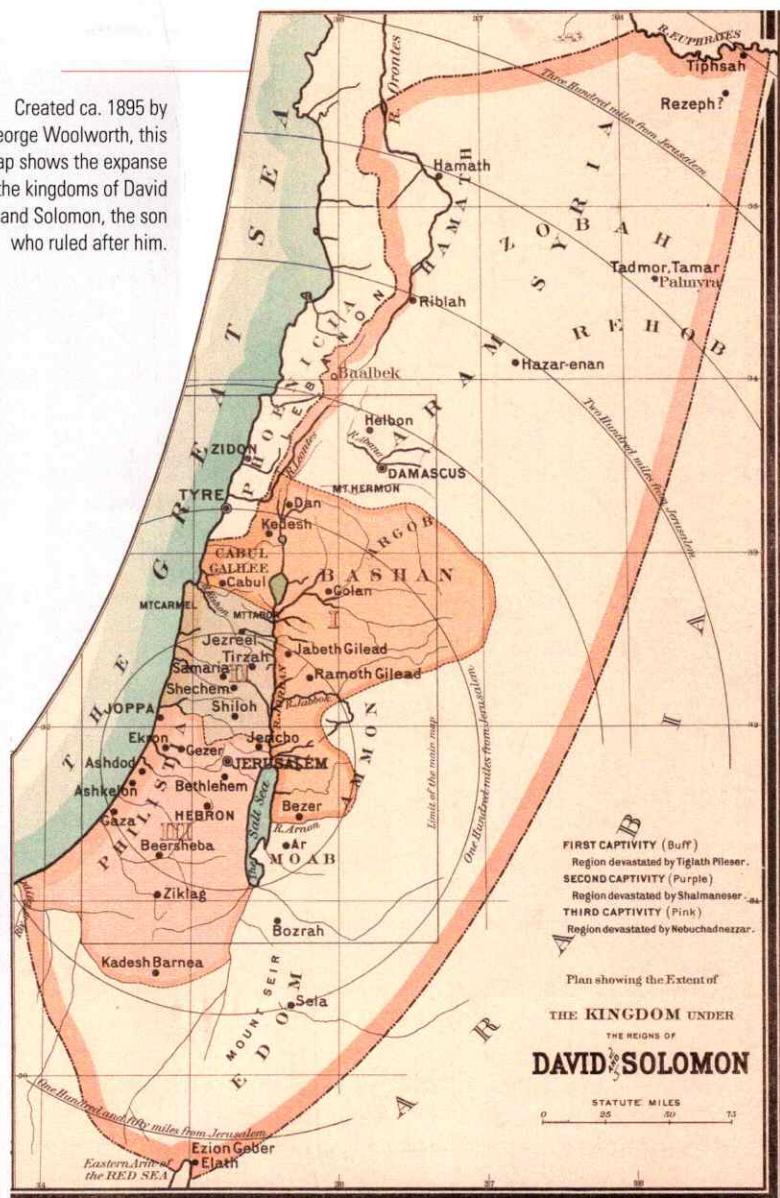
A FLOURISHING REALM?

Even if the inscriptions on the Tel Dan and Mesha monuments read as Lemire believes they do, they only attest to the existence of a king named David. They don't tell us what we really want to know: What sort of a ruler was he? What was his kingdom like?

Direct evidence may be scant. But indirect investigations of the era associated with King David tell an intriguing story. A broad survey conducted by the archaeologist Avi Ofer in the environs of Jerusalem discovered evidence of a population spike in the 10th and 11th centuries BCE—and our best guess places the establishment of the United Monarchy and the House of David in the same period. The number of people living in the hill country of Judah may have doubled. Moreover, Ofer's research also suggests that a cultural center developed during this time. Taken together, Ofer's findings point to the emergence of new political and military authority in the region—one powerful enough to protect residents from invaders and draw emigrants to Jerusalem. Israel, it seems, was flourishing.

All of this could have happened without a single charismatic leader. Nevertheless, Ofer's model is consistent with the tone of many of the historical books of the Bible. David's reign is often imagined as

Created ca. 1895 by George Woolworth, this map shows the expanse of the kingdoms of David and Solomon, the son who ruled after him.



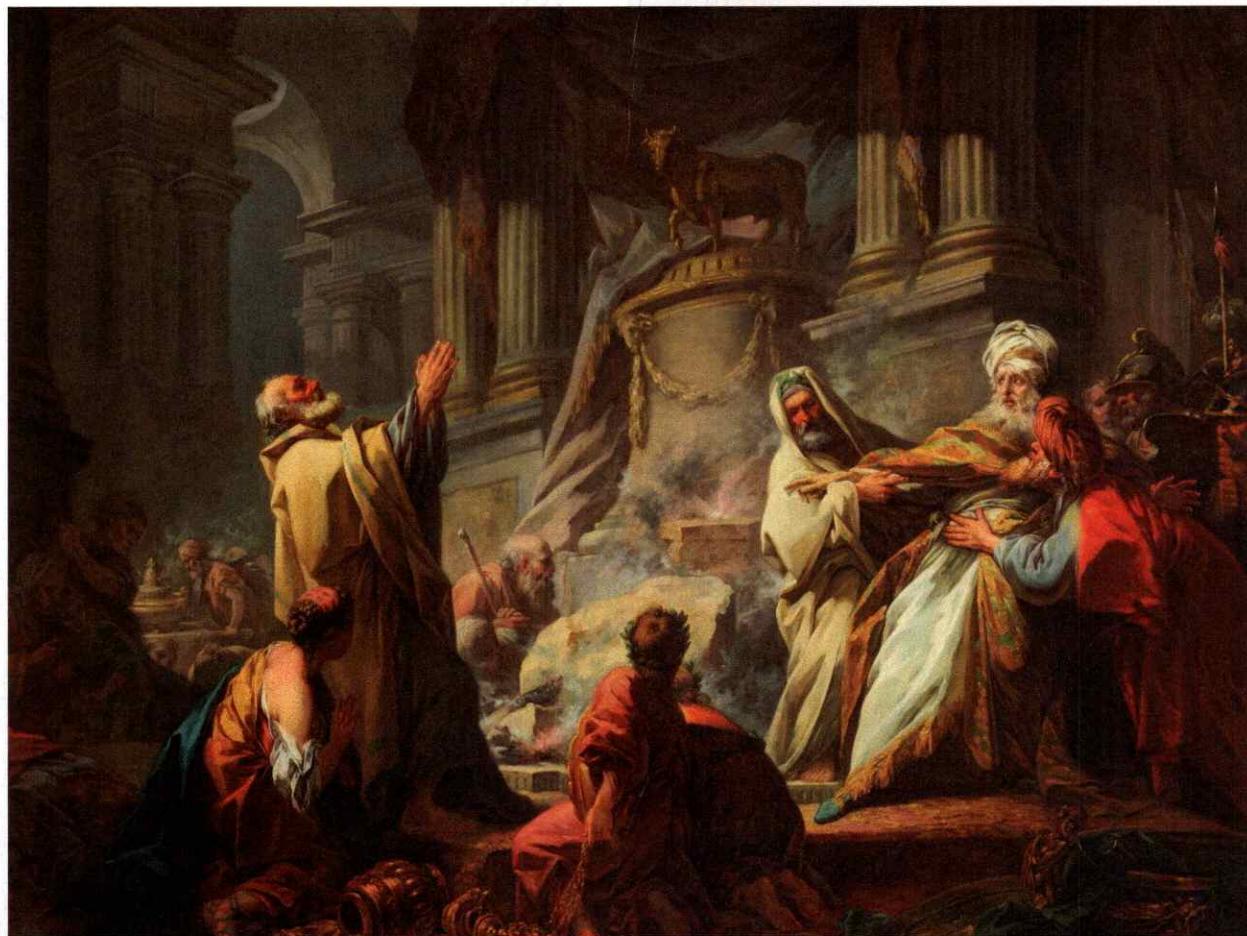
a golden age. Subsequent leaders strain to match his achievements but cannot live up to his standard. Excavations in the vicinity of Jerusalem do testify to a buildup of fortifications from the 10th to the 12th centuries BCE. If a hero did walk the Judean hills roughly 3,000 years ago, it would be consistent with the facts as we currently understand them.

ISRAEL FINKELSTEIN'S DAVID

At least one respected archaeologist isn't convinced. Israel Finkelstein is

not a strict Minimalist: he argues that a real-life David did exist, and he also believes that the United Monarchy was not wholly fabricated, either. But the evidence he has unearthed from the Judean soil fails to connect the first with the second. Finkelstein, who is the director of excavations at the ancient site of Megiddo, accepts a 10th to 11th century BCE date for King David—but he dates the ruins of many of the cities associated with David's empire to a time well after that.

Why would these sites be attributed to David? Finkelstein



calls our attention to a major obsession of the late historical books of the Old Testament: the rivalry between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel, and David's purported unification of the tribes. The Bible narrative frequently maligns the Northern Kingdom and praises the Southern, which was centered on Judah, Jerusalem, and the House of David. Finkelstein's digs at Megiddo and elsewhere demonstrate that the Northern Kingdom was larger, more powerful, more prosperous, and more sophisticated than the Bible indicates.

The archaeologist dates the stories of the United Monarchy to the 7th century BCE. By that date, the Northern Kingdom had been destroyed: crushed by the

mighty armies of the Assyrians. Only Judah still stood—and Josiah, the ambitious, devout King of Judah, saw the ruined Northern Kingdom as a target for annexation. Finkelstein posits that Josiah may have been inspired by the Northern king Jeroboam II, who is disparaged in the Bible, but who appears to have presided over a substantial empire that stretched from Syria and Jordan to the Sinai Desert. Excavators have found traces of Jeroboam II's vast, lost realm across the Levant: in the remote and mysterious Southern site of Kuntillet Ajrud, in the ancient ports of the Red Sea, and on the outskirts of Jerusalem itself.

As for David, he emerges from his encounter with Finkelstein's research with little of his famous

Jeroboam II and his father before him (standing left) encouraged worship of the golden calf idol in their kingdom and were disparaged in the Bible. Here they are depicted by Jean-Honoré Fragonard in his 1752 painting *Jeroboam Sacrificing to Idols*.

grandeur intact. Instead, the archaeologist imagines him as the leader of a modest kingdom in the southern part of Canaan—the founder of a house of rulers, but not a figure of great regional importance. Over time, legends accrued to this shadowy figure. It was only natural that the Hebrews, great storytellers that they were, would spin tales of his exploits—tales so rich, and so potent, that they are still echoing today. ■

BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Court History

Much of the Bible glows with praise for King David. The Second Book of Samuel, the book of the Bible that contains the actual David narrative, is an exception. It is often sharply critical of David. The author shares many stories that do not flatter their subject in the slightest. He is portrayed as a womanizer, a coward, an indirect murderer, and a ruler willing to abuse the power of his office to get what he wants. These verses sit uneasily alongside others that celebrate David as a national hero and a man of virtue. What is going on here?

As is so often the case with biblical books, the Second Book of Samuel does not speak in a single voice. Most students of the Bible agree that it was assembled from at least two sources: a so-called Late Source that probably dates from the 7th century BCE, and an Early Source that is candid about King David's flaws. The Early Source has never been precisely dated, but it's believed to contain some of the oldest material in the Bible—material that may have been composed by writers for whom David was still a living memory, roughly around 1,000 BCE.

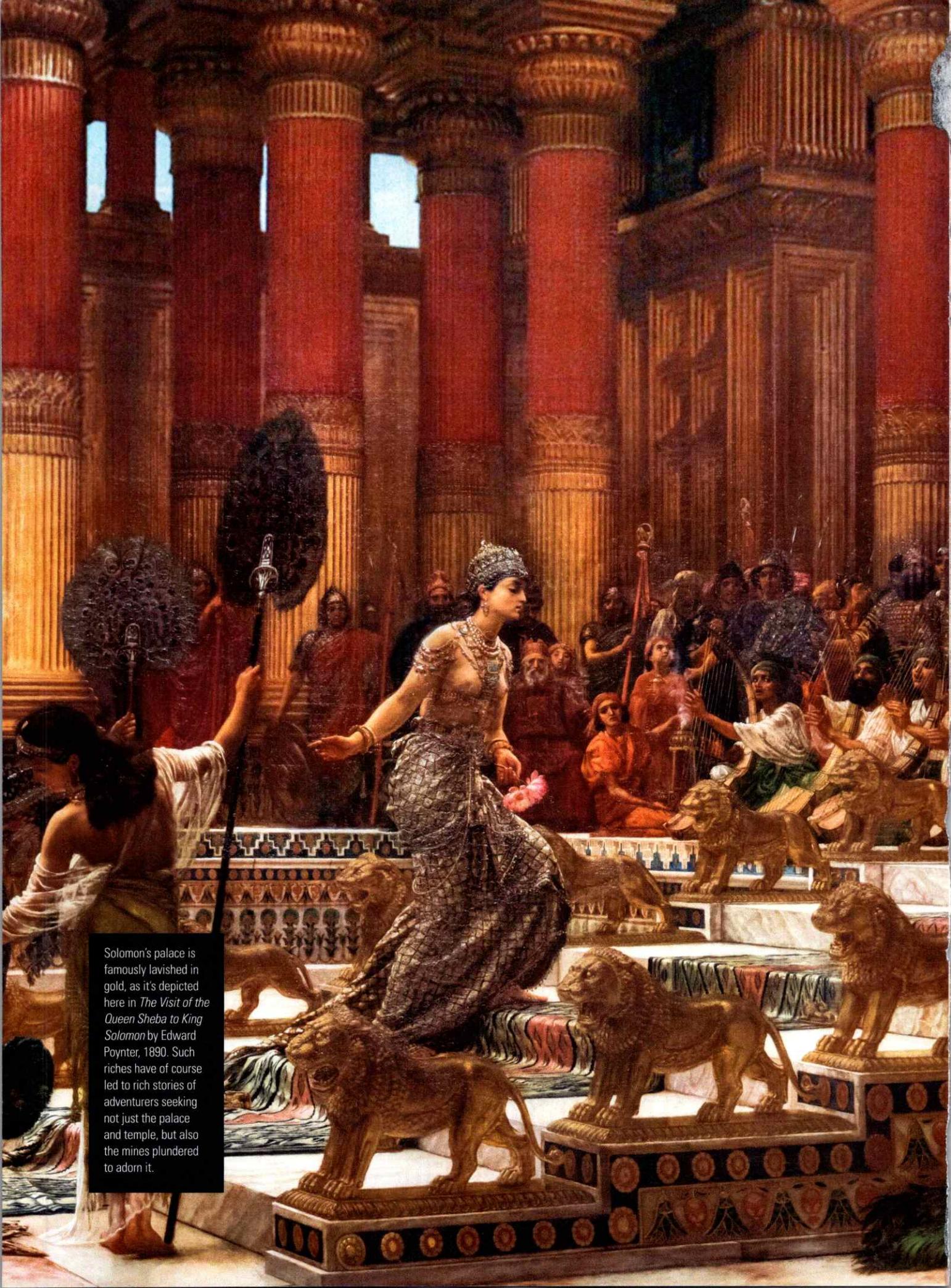
The lucidity of the Early Source makes the Second Book of Samuel a gripping read. The author proceeds with great care; he (or she) pays attention to characterization, causality, and plotting, just as a modern novelist would. There are consequences to David's actions, and his many mistakes in judgment are shown to be costly.

Supporting characters abound, including David's wives, friends, generals, advisors, and scheming heirs. Moral implications aren't as easy to locate as they are elsewhere in the Bible.

Because of the frankness of the Early Source—not to mention the level of incident and detail in the narrative—many writers have concluded that its writer must have had intimate knowledge of David's court. Some have even guessed that the verses were originally composed by a person mentioned in the Bible: David's high priest, perhaps, or one of his disgruntled wives. Until archaeologists recover an original manuscript, it's impossible to tell. But it is possible that chapters 9 through 20 of the Second Book of Samuel are a kind of literary artifact—a peek into the affairs of one of the Old Testament's giants. Because of the writer's skill, the story feels immediate; because of the candor of the observations, the characters feel ugly and all too real. It is telling, perhaps, that the most convincing evidence of David's existence comes from the only source that isn't willing to treat him as a hero.

This 7th century CE plate shows Samuel, whose book is often critical of David, anointing the latter as king, recognizing him as God's chosen one.





Solomon's palace is famously lavished in gold, as it's depicted here in *The Visit of the Queen Sheba to King Solomon* by Edward Poynter, 1890. Such riches have of course led to rich stories of adventurers seeking not just the palace and temple, but also the mines plundered to adorn it.



DIGGING FOR KING SOLOMON'S MINES

Stories portray the search for this Old Testament source of wealth as high adventure, but the truth reads more like a mystery novel.

In 1885, the Victorian adventure novelist H. Rider Haggard published *King Solomon's Mines*, a fictional tale of an expedition in Africa. Allan Quatermain, its hero, is a big-game hunter who discovers the long-hidden source of the fabled wealth of the biblical King Solomon in an undiscovered valley. The book was a bestseller and a cultural sensation, and it made Haggard a literary star. *King Solomon's Mines* became a cornerstone of a new genre: the Lost World story.

The Lost World genre emerged as the colonial era was approaching its zenith. Archaeological "discoveries" in areas controlled by imperial powers—Egypt's monuments, the ruins of lost civilizations in Mesopotamia—fascinated Europeans. In stories by Haggard and others, the white explorer of distant realms confronted and pacified the natives, and, quite often, came away with saddlebags full of treasure. It was exciting; it was also a stark metaphor for the colonial system itself. Before writing *King Solomon's Mines*, Haggard was employed as an assistant to a British colonial governor in South Africa. He based Quatermain on Frederick Selous, a famous hunter, adventurer, and guide who traded with indigenous tribes and secured artifacts and specimens of rare animals for European museums.

Selous was not an archaeologist. Neither was Allan Quatermain. Nevertheless, *King Solomon's Mines* transformed the popular impression of archaeology forever, and lent

it overtones of swashbuckling adventure that few archaeologists have ever sought or saw. The long search for evidence of the mines of King Solomon hasn't always been as exciting as a Victorian storybook. It's involved sweat, dead ends, and hard digging—and occasional leaps of faith, too.

A VOYAGE TO THE LAND OF WEALTH

The Land of Canaan is not rich in gold deposits. If King Solomon's palace was as opulent and gleaming as the legends suggest it was, Solomon had to have gotten his precious metals from somewhere else. The Bible offers a clue: it reports regular shipments of valuables from a place called Ophir (or Tarshish, the other place-name mentioned in the Kings verses). Descriptions of the Ophir cargo vary based on the translation, but the haul usually includes ivory, gemstones, rare wood for construction and ornamentation of the Temple, and gold. Ophir has captured the imaginations of

centuries of treasure-hunters and other dreamers, including Ptolemy, who believed it was located in present-day India.

But where was Ophir? No one knows for sure. The Bible reports that shipments from Ophir were brought to Solomon by Hiram, the friendly king of Tyre. The seafaring Phoenicians of Tyre maintained an extensive trading network that gathered goods from all over the Mediterranean and beyond. Phoenician trade routes were mainly coastal, but the strings of their web extended to parts of the world that are infrequently mentioned in the Bible, including the Indian Ocean.

According to the Book of Kings, Solomon's trading fleet was constructed at the Red Sea port city of Ezion-Geber, where the Israelites, along with Hiram, had established a launching place for their ships. If this story is accurate, it represents the largest collaborative maritime expedition in biblical history, and it attests to the importance of interchange with Ophir. Wherever Ophir was, Solomon and his allies



Canaan, where Solomon's opulent palace was built, had little precious metal of its own. The Bible tells how the gold needed to decorate the palace came from Ophir, delivered by King Hiram of Tyre as illustrated in this steel engraving by H. Melville and F. W. Topham, 1841.

Solomon's port was built at the biblical city of Ezion-Geber, but that place has been lost to time, though archaeologists continue to look for it on the Gulf of Aqaba, shown here in this illustration by Louis Haghe and David Roberts, 1845.

BELOW: For decades, scholars believed that copper mines in the desert outside Aqaba had actually supplied

Solomon with the precious metals used to decorate his palace.



were willing to move mountains to get there.

The remains of Ezion-Geber have never been unearthed. But context clues have prompted archaeologists to search for evidence of Solomon's port near Elat, the southernmost city in modern Israel, as well as Aqaba in Jordan. These desert towns front the Gulf of Aqaba, which opens into the Red Sea. From Aqaba, a merchant fleet would be able to access Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Yemen, and, through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait,

the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the world beyond.

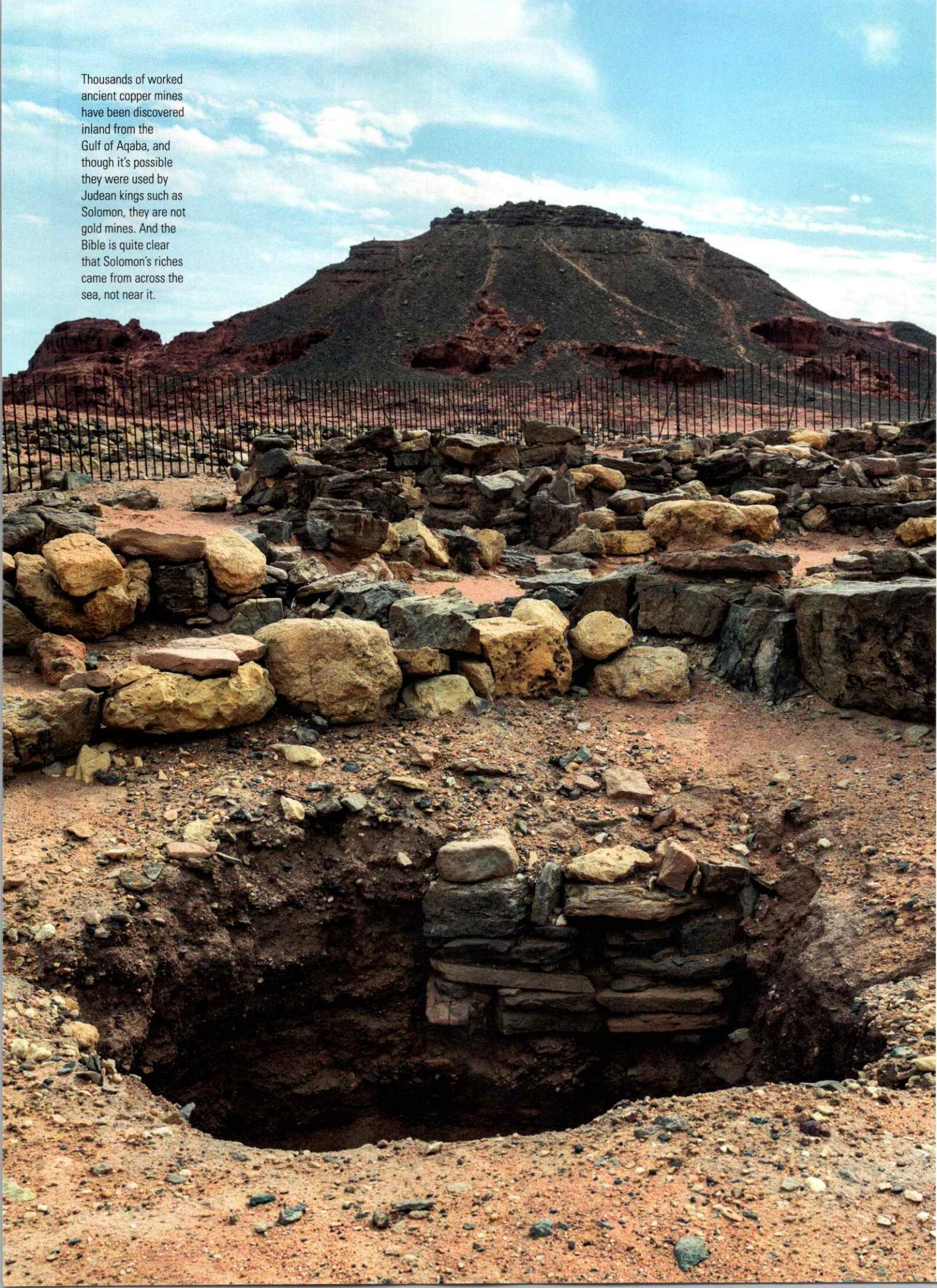
“THE PITTSBURGH OF PALESTINE”

The respected archaeologist and rabbi Nelson Glueck believed that he'd found Ezion-Geber and, with it, verification of the story of King Solomon and his long-distance sea expeditions. In 1938, Glueck, one of the pioneers of biblical archaeology and an assiduous digger, excavated Tell al-Khalifa, a small hill in

the rugged desert surrounding Aqaba. After examining the site, he discovered sulfur marks indicative of intensive metalwork. Copper, he surmised, was the true source of Solomon's treasure. Here was, in his words, the port city for the “Pittsburgh of Palestine”—a locus of mining and industry that generated wealth, power, and influence for the monarchy in Jerusalem, 200 miles to the north.

Glueck believed that the site dated to the time of the biblical King Solomon—and for decades, his interpretation of the stones at Tell al-Khalifa was accepted as scientific orthodoxy. But subsequent examinations have challenged every element of Glueck's theory. The ruined structures that Glueck took for ancient copper-smelting facilities bore architectural features that were instead consistent with granaries. The severe shortage of water in the region cast doubt on Tell al-Khalifa's suitability for sustained industry. In 1969, an ancient Egyptian temple was discovered in the southern Negev, suggesting that the Israelites may not have been the dominant power in the region when the small settlement

Thousands of worked ancient copper mines have been discovered inland from the Gulf of Aqaba, and though it's possible they were used by Judean kings such as Solomon, they are not gold mines. And the Bible is quite clear that Solomon's riches came from across the sea, not near it.



flourished. Most problematically, the water in the Gulf of Aqaba was found to have been far too shallow to accommodate the sort of massive fleet-building enterprise that the Bible describes. Eventually, Glueck recanted. In a reversal that shook biblical archaeology, he made his doubts about the site public. Tell al-Khalifa, he conceded, was not likely to be a remnant of Ezion-Geber after all.

Faith in a "Pittsburgh of Palestine" in the Negev desert is not so easily dispelled. Perhaps southern Israel could not accommodate a merchant navy, but it has always been a good place to coax copper from the earth. Humans have been working with copper for close to 10,000 years, and some of the first copper mines in the world were scratched into the red rock of the Timna Valley millennia ago. Timna Park, 20 miles north of Aqaba and Tell al-Khalifa, once rested on a bounty of copper deposits. Excavations conducted by Beno Rothenberg demonstrated that the dwellers of the Southern Levant knew this well and exploited the precious resource.

Rothenberg discovered thousands of individual copper mines in the Timna Valley, plus facilities for working and transporting metal: smelters,

gatehouses, stables for animals, possible barracks for guards. Mining on a wide scale, he determined, had been taking place in the valley since the beginning of recorded history.

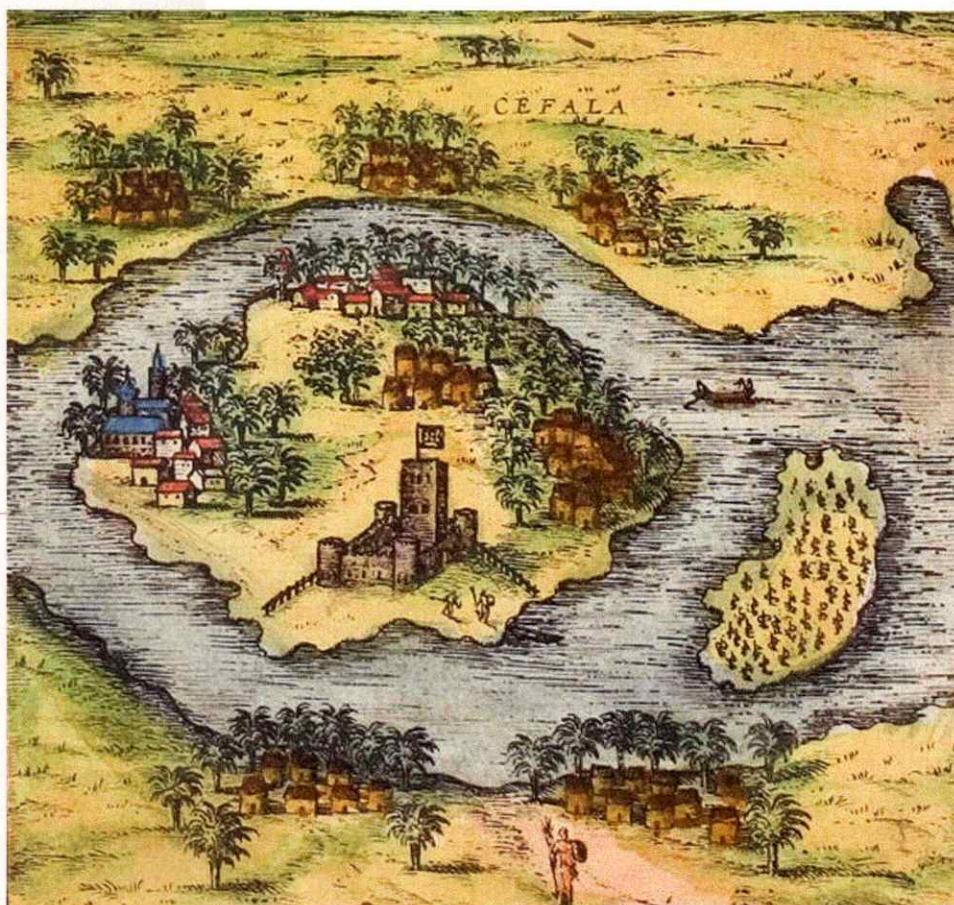
Other archaeologists have built on Rothenberg's work, and concluded to their satisfaction that there was substantial industrial activity in the Timna Valley during the period of the biblical Solomon's reign—particularly on the so-called Slaves' Hill, where tools, clothing, ceramics, olive and date pits, and copper slag were recovered and dated to the 10th century BCE. On the other side of the Jordan, the massive copper complex at Khirbet en Nahas was running strong at the same time. No archaeologist has yet determined who was in control of these complexes, but it is not impossible to imagine that the haul

from the copper mines might have contributed to the treasures of Judean kings.

SOLOMON AND AFRICA

Yet there is something about this interpretation that jars against our collective idea of Solomon, biblical riches, and treasure-hunting in general. Copper was prized by the ancients, but the text of the Book of Kings is clear on the matter: it was gold, not copper, that decorated Solomon's court. One memorable verse even gives a precise amount for a shipment—420 talents, or more than 30,000 pounds.

Nowhere do the stories mention mines. Instead, the gold always comes from somewhere across the sea. Distance, it seems, was not an obstacle: the ships that sailed for the precious metal were gone for



The African savanna has long been a strong candidate for the lost gold mines of Ophir. In 1502, Sofala in Mozambique became a hopeful contender (hence its inclusion in the 1572 atlas *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* by Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg) but to no avail.



three years. Even in the Iron Age, a ship could cover many nautical miles of wide blue ocean in such a broad period of time. The source of Solomon's gold might be anywhere that merchant ships could reach.

For centuries, long-distance sailors kept watch for any sign of Ophir. The Solomon Islands in the South Pacific are so named because the Spanish seafarer Álvaro de Mendaña expected a gilded reward for his explorations there. Christopher Columbus, too, believed that there was a good chance that he'd encounter the biblical ports on his westward voyages across the Atlantic Ocean. The Christian scholar Thomas Bozio, writing in the 16th century, argued that Columbus had indeed found Ophir—and located an augury of his discoveries in biblical prophecy.

For many other speculators throughout the centuries, sub-Saharan Africa seemed to be the most reasonable place to look. It was right there at the far end of the Red Sea, so it was a logical destination for the fleet at Ezion-Geber. Gold was perennially rumored to be buried in its hills. The Book of Kings testifies to the presence of ivory in Solomon's haul. The monarch's storied relationship

with the Queen of Sheba also pointed the investigations south. Never mind that most scholars believed that Sheba, if it existed at all, was somewhere in the Arabian Peninsula; a long tradition—fully endorsed by true believers and tale-spinners on the African Horn—placed the queen's realm in Ethiopia.

In 1502, Thomas Lopez, a Portuguese seaman, writer, and scrivener for Vasco da Gama, brought home tales of Ophir from his journeys to Sofala in Mozambique. His speculations lit a fire that would beckon countless explorers into the African savanna—including Karl Mauch, whose investigations at Great Zimbabwe in 1871 we've already discussed in the chapter on the hunt for the Garden of Eden.

Mauch's misinterpretations of the site are a powerful example of the intellectual danger of archaeological Maximalism: the practice of beginning with the Bible stories and matching evidence to elements of the text. Every artifact found at the ruined site was bent by Mauch to the service of confirmation of scripture. Every tumbledown building was part of Sheba's kingdom; every rock was correlated to a commodity from Kings. Even splinters of wood were associated with the Cedars of

Through the centuries, explorers expected to find Solomon's mines as they sailed farther and farther around the world. The 16th-century navigator Álvaro de Mendaña named the remote Solomon Islands after the treasures he expected to find.

Lebanon. All of Mauch's speculations were proven wrong, and no gold mine was ever found.

Such is the lure of gold that centuries of failure have not dampened the ardor of treasure-hunters—or, for that matter, curiosity-seekers. The travel writer Tahir Shah was not driven to Ethiopia by greed. He was looking for a different kind of gold: a great story to tell. His self-guided journey, recounted in the 2002 book *In Search of King Solomon's Mines*, takes him from the ancient churches of northern Ethiopia to the "haunted" mountain Tullu Welel near the Sudanese border. Here the Devil himself is said to guard a shaft filled with gold. Shah does find a cavern in the mountain—but his excitement is soon extinguished. In centuries of good company, he hits a dead end. ■

BEYOND THE BIBLE

Who Was Solomon Anyway?

There is scant extrabiblical evidence of an actual King David. We know even less about the actual Solomon. In the books of Samuel and Kings, he is the favored son and successor of David, but he must outlast many other aspirants to gain the throne. Once there, he presides over the United Monarchy for 40 years—and under his guidance, it continues to flourish. Solomon is renowned for his wisdom and equanimity as much as he is for his vast riches, and stories that echo Kings can be read in the Quran, the Hadiths, the Talmud, and the New Testament.

According to the Bible, it is under Solomon's watch that the Temple in Jerusalem is completed. This is the project that consumes much of the king's wealth. His architects adorn the Temple with baths, pillars of bronze, and a golden altar. The house of worship becomes the focus of religious and civic life (which were likely one and the same) in Jerusalem for centuries—until the city's destruction in 586 BCE by the Babylonian armies.

Was the Temple really as opulent as the Bible suggests it was? Currently, there is no way to know. As we'll discuss in the next chapter, investigations on the Temple Mount are complicated by political difficulties. Nothing confirmed to be related to Solomon's Temple has ever been discovered on the site, which isn't surprising, and doesn't rule out the possibility that the Temple

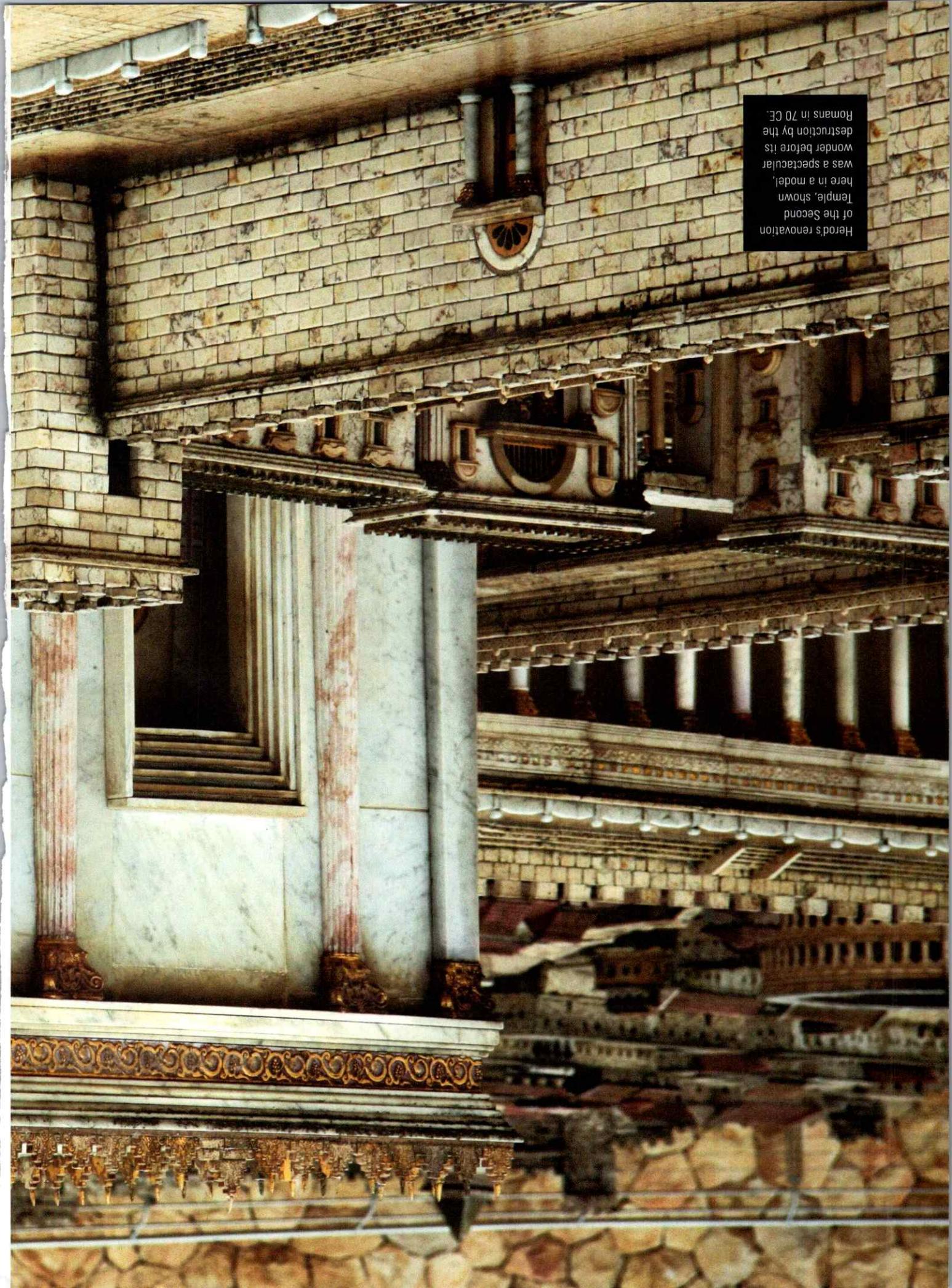
was exactly as Kings says it was. There's little reason that any of the gold and riches of Solomon would still be left in Jerusalem after the conquest. Everything of value would have been dragged away to Babylon.

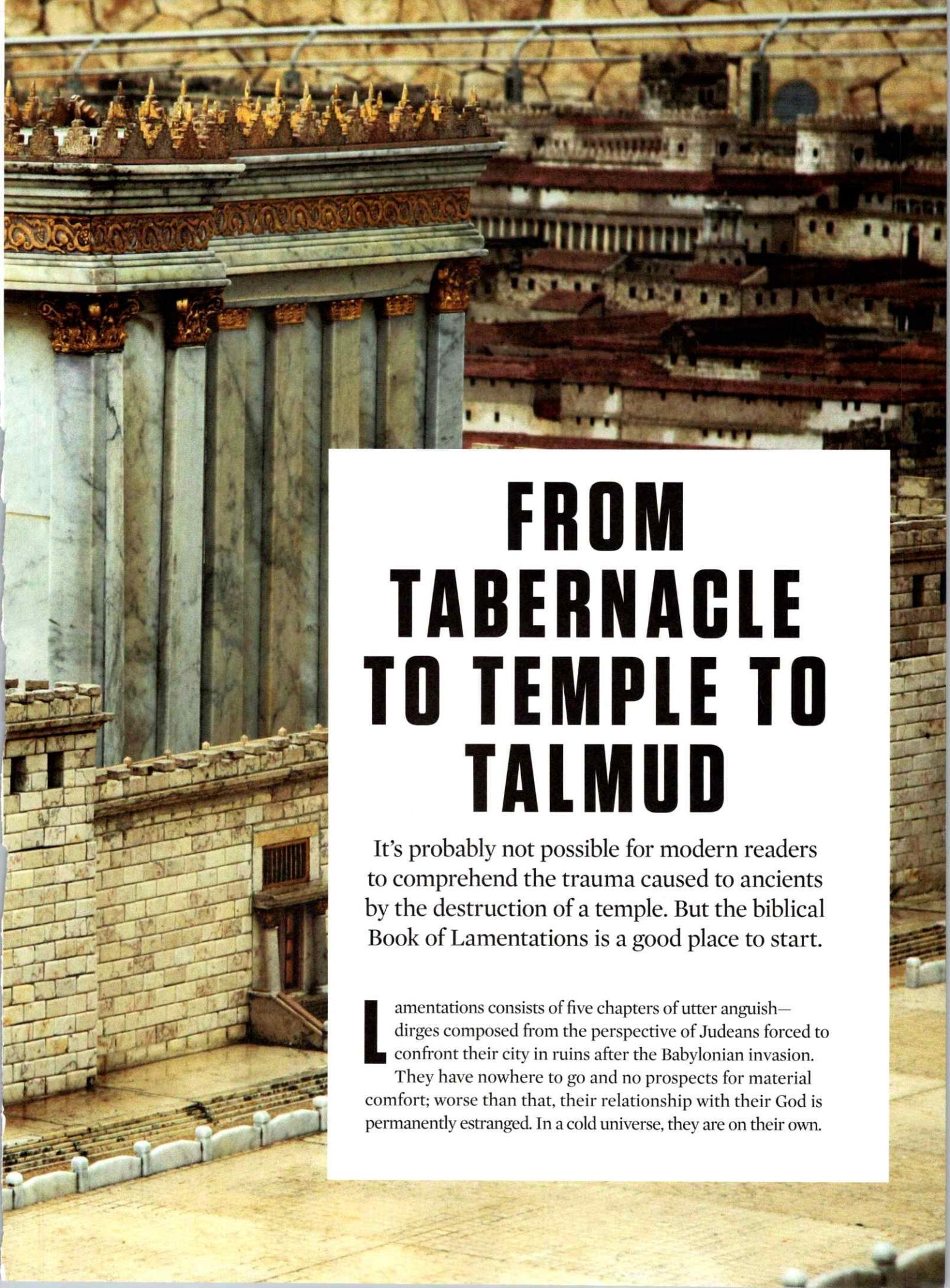
Perhaps the court of Nebuchadnezzar was indeed the final resting place of the fabled gold of Ophir, and evidence of Solomon's reign is lost under Mesopotamian sand. If the Babylonian king *did* end up with the riches of Jerusalem, the loot didn't do his empire much lasting good: it would fall a half-century later to the armies of Persia. There is a strong implication in the Book of Kings that Solomon's overstuffed treasury was as much a liability as it was a blessing. In middle age, we are told, Solomon turned away from fidelity to the Lord. As Jerusalem grew wealthy, the rest of the empire of David began to melt away. The United Monarchy shuddered during the tail end of Solomon's reign and split in two shortly after his death. Gold, the Bible seems to say, is no substitute for just governance.



King Solomon, shown here in an 1883 engraving by Gustave Doré, is renowned for his knowledge and equanimity as much as for his wealth.

Herod's renovation
of the Second
Temple, shown
here in a model,
was a spectacular
wonder before its
destruction by the
Romans in 70 CE.





FROM TABERNACLE TO TEMPLE TO TALMUD

It's probably not possible for modern readers to comprehend the trauma caused to ancients by the destruction of a temple. But the biblical Book of Lamentations is a good place to start.

Lamentations consists of five chapters of utter anguish—dirges composed from the perspective of Judeans forced to confront their city in ruins after the Babylonian invasion.

They have nowhere to go and no prospects for material comfort; worse than that, their relationship with their God is permanently estranged. In a cold universe, they are on their own.

The Temple was more than a repository of the kingdom's wealth and a symbol of its political strength. It was the focus of culture—the place where citizens could interact with the Almighty. In the Bible, the destruction of Solomon's Temple is a cataclysm that nearly wrecks the Israelites.

In exile, they remain steadfast, and after they are restored to Jerusalem by the Persian king Cyrus, they are able to construct a substitute. This Second Temple stands for centuries until, in an agonizing repeat of history, it is demolished by the Romans in 70 CE, once again severing the connection between the people of Jerusalem and their God.

Herod the Great, the Roman-supported king of Judea and a passionate builder, completely renovated the Second Temple in 19 BCE, decades before it

was destroyed. His work on the building was so extensive and so ambitious in its scope that it was, in effect, a different structure than its antecedents. Herod's Temple was received as a wonder by contemporaries: the 1st-century historian Josephus praised the beauty of its marble walls in his diaries. "It seemed in the distance like a mountain covered with snow," wrote Josephus, "for any part not covered in gold was gleaming white."

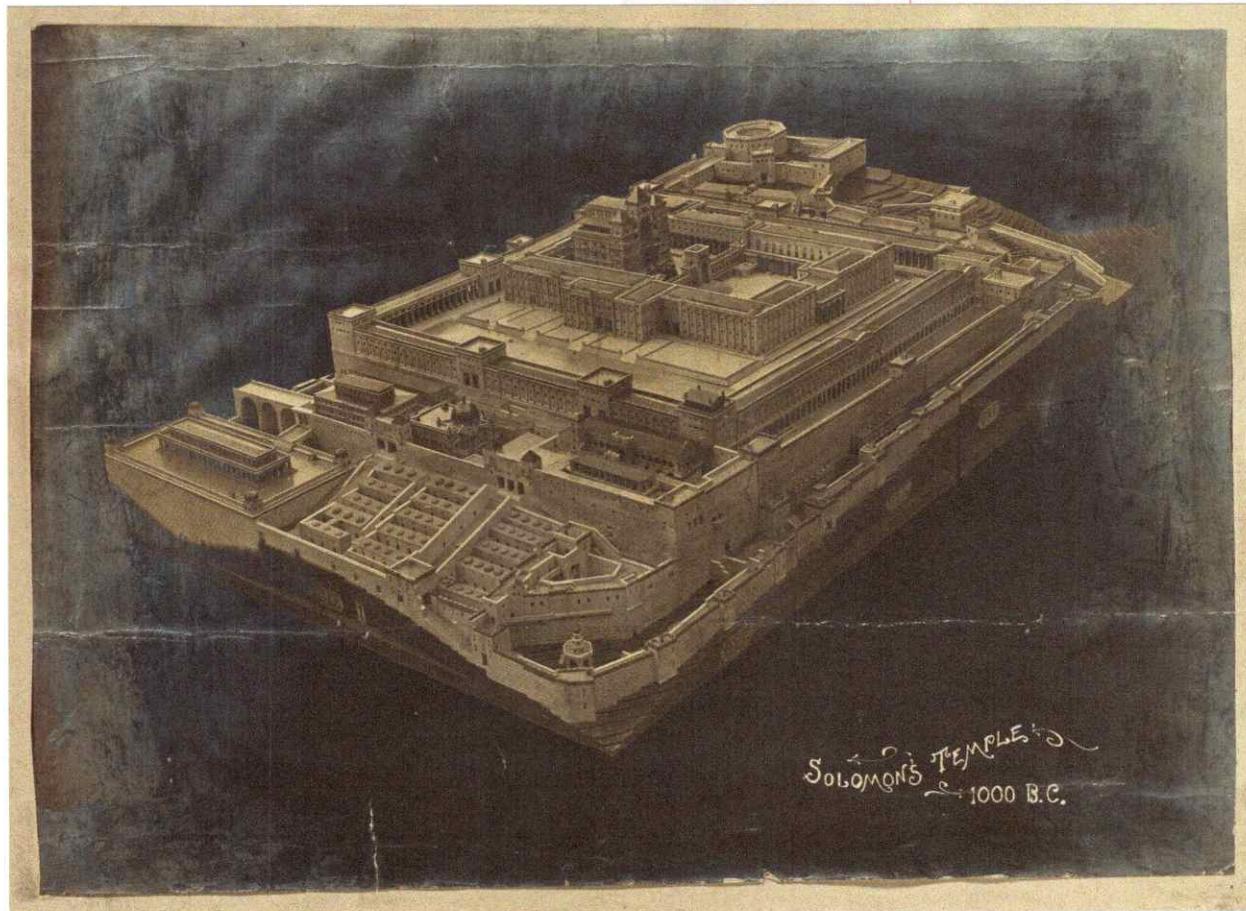
Extrabiblical evidence of temple activity in Jerusalem has been recovered by archaeologists. Almost all of it can be traced back to Herod's Temple and no further. This does not mean, however, that the Bible stories are misleading. Evidence of the lost temples may be tantalizingly near—a startling haul of artifacts and inscriptions could be right under the Jerusalem topsoil. Yet because of the precarious political situation

in the city, there has been very little excavation done around the Temple complex. When will Jerusalem be ready for the spade, and what will we discover if and when we are finally able to investigate?

TRACES OF DAVID AND SOLOMON

Some famous objects get dug up out of the ground. Others arrive in the public eye by unorthodox routes. In 1979, epigrapher André Lemaire stumbled upon one of the most controversial artifacts in modern archaeological history in the same

The Bible gave many specific details about Solomon's Temple. The 1862 architectural drawing shown here reflects those specifications.





The Islamic shrine known as the Dome of the Rock is built around this rough stone. Devout Jews believe the Ark of the Covenant stood on it when the site was Solomon's Temple. Muslims believe it is where Muhammad ascended to heaven.

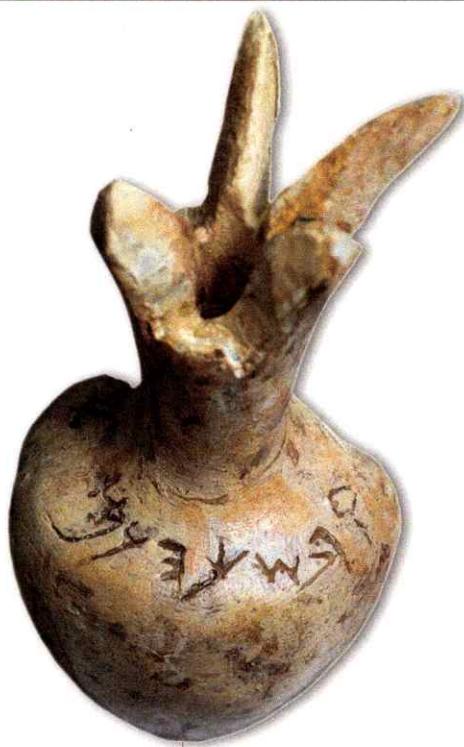
sort of place that a tourist might: in an antiquities shop in Jerusalem. It was a small replica of a pomegranate that appeared to have been carved out of ivory. A hole large enough to accommodate the end of a rod or scepter had been drilled into its bottom. Engraved on the body of the pomegranate was a message: "belonging to the temple of Yahweh, Holy to the Priests." Was this, at last, a remnant of King Solomon's long-lost Temple?

For many years it was treated as if it was. Nahman Avigad, the respected Israeli archaeologist and epigrapher, authenticated the inscription, and the object was declared very old indeed. The pomegranate found its way into the Israel Museum, where it was given its own room and bathed in dramatic lighting. The exhibit was a popular success, drawing large crowds. Here was an example of living history—a link with the grand house of worship ordered by King David and completed at astronomical cost by his son King Solomon.

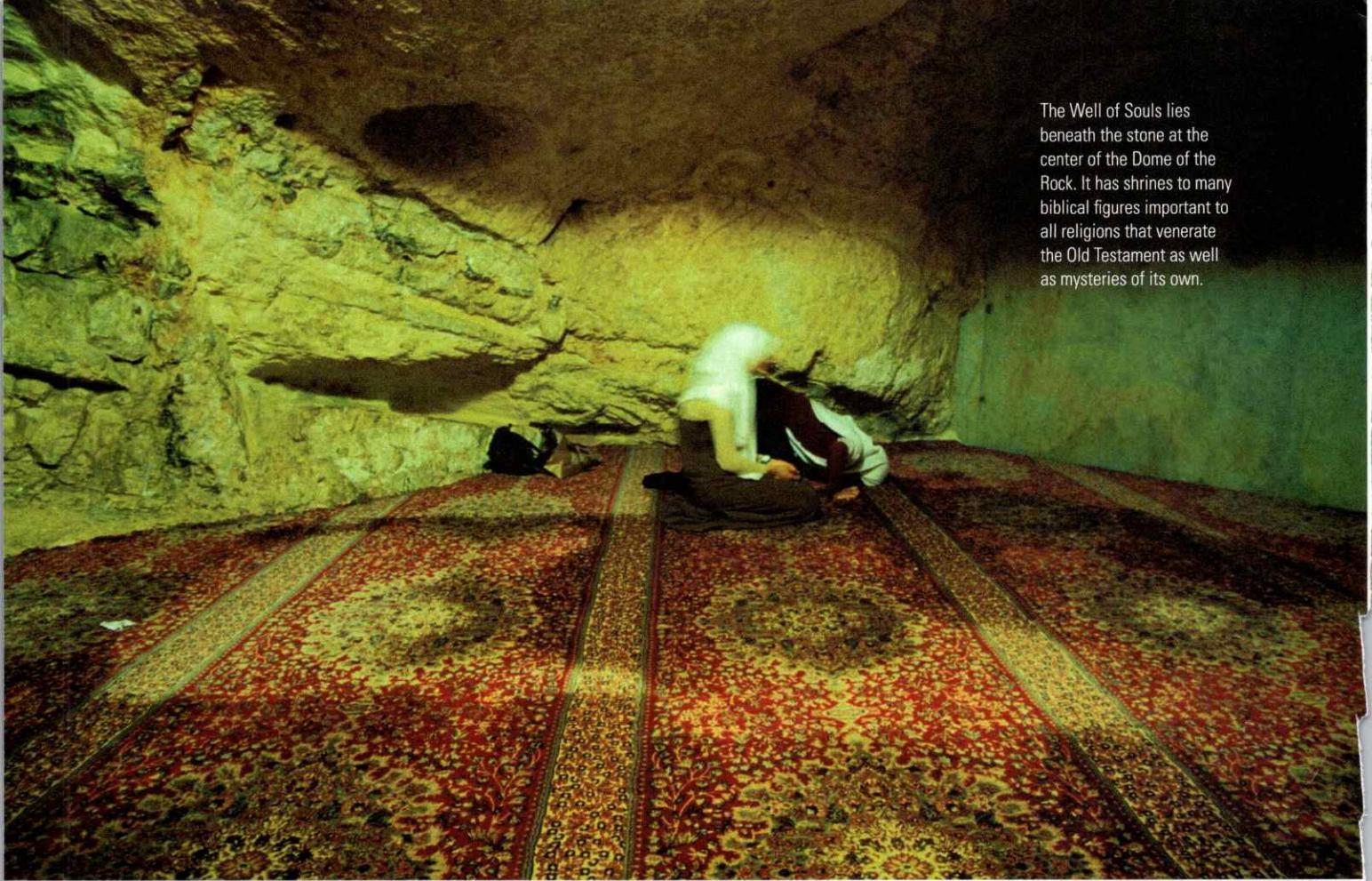
Unless it wasn't. In 2004, a committee of scientists reexamined

the pomegranate and declared it a forgery. The artifact dated to the Iron Age, but the engraving, they argued, was recent. Other scholars voiced their skepticism as well. Lemaire held firm—as did other scholars who were convinced by the inscription. The deadlock persists to this day. Even after examination under powerful microscopes, archaeologists have not been able to come to unanimity about the authenticity of the pomegranate.

Yet even if it is true that the inscription is as ancient as the rest of the artifact, there is no reason to conclude beyond a doubt that the pomegranate (which is actually carved out of a hippopotamus bone, not a shaft of ivory) had a direct connection to the Temple of Solomon. It may have belonged to a different house of worship altogether. This would, no doubt, come as a disappointment to the many believers in the literal truth of the Bible who await factual confirmation of the stories in the Books of Samuel and Kings. The historicity of scripture has terrestrial as well as spiritual



This ivory pomegranate, with an inscription reading "belonging to the temple of Yahweh, Holy to the Priests," is thought by some scholars to be a remnant of King Solomon's Temple, whereas others believe the inscription is a forgery.



The Well of Souls lies beneath the stone at the center of the Dome of the Rock. It has shrines to many biblical figures important to all religions that venerate the Old Testament as well as mysteries of its own.

implications. To understand this, it's helpful to examine the place where archaeology and politics intersect most closely: the summit of the Temple Mount.

UNDERNEATH THE FOUNDATION

On the very top of the Jerusalem hill that hosts the Temple complex, there is a large, flat, rough stone, grooved and pockmarked from the weight of the centuries. According to tradition, this is the rock upon which the Ark of the Covenant rested after King David brought it to his capital city. It was, in essence, the very floor of the innermost sanctum of the Temple of Solomon—the holiest ground imaginable, the bedrock of God's dwelling on Earth. Many devout Jews call this the Foundation Stone of the lost First Temple, and pray toward it. There is, however, an obstruction to the sort of excavation and analysis that such

an object would normally invite. The Stone is now at the very center of the Dome of the Rock, one of the most sacred places in Islam.

The Dome of the Rock is not a mosque. It is a shrine built in 691–2 CE by the Muslim rulers of Jerusalem and reconstructed three centuries later after an earthquake shook the Temple Mount. It has stood ever since on the site of Herod's ruined Temple, and it has long been recognized as one of the world's most beautiful ancient structures and a symbol of the multicultural grandeur of Jerusalem. Muslims, too, venerate the rock at the center of the shrine—it is traditionally recognized as the stepping-stone used by Muhammad during his ascension to heaven. They do not disagree with an assessment made in the Talmud that the Foundation Stone is the center of the world.

Underneath the Stone, the mystery deepens. A hole in the rock leads to a subterranean chamber known as the Well of Souls. In

the darkness of the Well there are shrines to biblical figures venerated by Muslims, Jews, and Christians: Abraham, Elijah, David, Solomon. The dimensions of the cavern have been recorded by clerics and explorers alike: it is a tight 6-meter square with stone walls and a low ceiling. But a sag in the floor of the Well invites further investigation. Some scholars wonder if it leads to another chamber—one that might even contain the lost Ark of the Covenant.

The city of Jerusalem does not want an archaeological excavation underneath the Dome of the Rock. Overseers of the Dome are justifiably leery of investigation, too. Some zealous Jews dream of erecting a third Temple on the Mount; eschatological Christians who favor a literal, dispensationalist reading of the Book of Revelation also see the reconstruction of the Temple as a welcome prelude to end times. Because a third Temple

would need to be built on the site of the Holy of Holies—the Foundation Stone and the Well of Souls and whatever lies underneath—the Dome of the Rock would have to be demolished. Over the centuries, numerous plots to destroy the Dome have been foiled. This has, understandably, eroded trust.

But science and history still call. A recent low-key cooperative effort between Israeli archaeologists and the Islamic Waqf that administers the Dome of the Rock unearthed artifacts on the Temple Mount that date to pre-exilic (before the exile of the Jews to Babylon) biblical times. These include fragments of pottery, olive pits, and animal bones—nothing as spectacular as the Ark of the Covenant, but significant

nonetheless and proof positive that Jerusalemites of different faiths can work together to better understand their shared heritage.

THE LEGACY OF HEROD

In her single-volume study *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, the prolific religious scholar and public intellectual Karen Armstrong discusses the long and undersung history of cooperation and teamwork among Jews and Muslims on the Temple Mount. It was the broad-minded Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent who swept, washed, and helped restore the Western Wall and guaranteed Jews the right to pray there. The Western Wall, known to the devout as the “Wailing

Wall,” is an archaeological marvel that stands on the Mount in broad daylight—the most visible remnant of the great Temple complex constructed by Herod and destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

Muslim rulers also helped reconstruct the top of the Wall, filling in the crest of the barrier with bricks that approach the color and texture of the blocks beneath them. The bricks do not, however, match the size of the original stones in the wall—for that would have been an undertaking indeed. The Western Wall testifies to the grandeur and ambition of Herod’s building projects and the staggering amount of manpower it must have taken to place these gigantic slabs in position. One stone in the Kotel

The Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, is a structure leftover from Herod’s grand renovation of the Second Temple.





Tunnels of the Wall weighs 570 tons, making it one of the heaviest objects ever lifted by human beings without the assistance of machinery. Archaeological examination of the site has revealed the huge extent of the renovation: Herod's workers flattened the top of the Mount, erected a great square platform for the Temple, and built four enormous walls (including the Western Wall) to support the complex.

Many sections of flagstones from the platform survived the Roman assault, and visitors to

the Temple Mount still tread on them, just as Herod himself might have. Archaeologists have also recovered a pair of inscribed stones that were once pieces of the Temple. Disconnected as they are from the structure they once decorated, they do give viewers a powerful impression of the imposing nature of the Temple.

A hewn basalt slab unearthed in 1968 by historian and biblical archaeologist Benjamin Mazar directs musicians "to the place of trumpeting." The limestone

Temple Warning inscription has been known to science for longer than that: it was discovered a century and a half ago by the French archaeologist Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau. Large, neatly-struck letters chiseled into the face of the stone prohibit pagan visitors from proceeding farther into the Temple complex. It is hard to gaze upon these fragments of architectural glory without wishing that the Roman armies had heeded the warning and left us all a mighty Temple to admire. ■

The flagstones used in the platform built by Herod are still in place today, so visitors to the mount tread on these same stones.

LEFT: The Western Stone, found in the Kotel Tunnels of the Wailing Wall, weighs 570 tons and is one of the heaviest objects ever erected by humans without machinery.

BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Jebusites

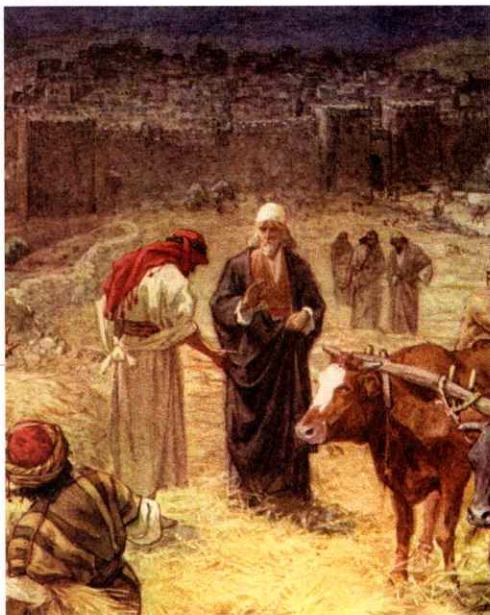
At its best—and it is most often at its best—biblical archaeology illuminates fascinating periods of history and human spiritual development, and exposes and examines the roots of our faith. At its worst, it has little to do with religion. The search for evidence of ancient cult activity on the Temple Mount is sometimes hard to separate from the politics of a turbulent region. If it can be demonstrated conclusively that King David got there first, subsequent claims to political authority over Jerusalem—and there have been many of them—are undermined.

Yet the Bible introduces David as a newcomer to Jerusalem. His rule over the city may have been divinely ordained, but it required the displacement of the Jebusites, the tribe that ruled in the city before his takeover. The Old Testament does not restrict the Jebusites to the Holy City, but Jerusalem is their capital, and it is against them that David must contend. Notably, David does not put the Jebusites to the sword or sack their city, which suggests that he might have taken Jerusalem by subterfuge and ruled with local support. Some historians have even suggested that certain members of David's inner circle—most notably the influential priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan, who make their presences felt in the court narrative in Second Samuel—were Jebusites.

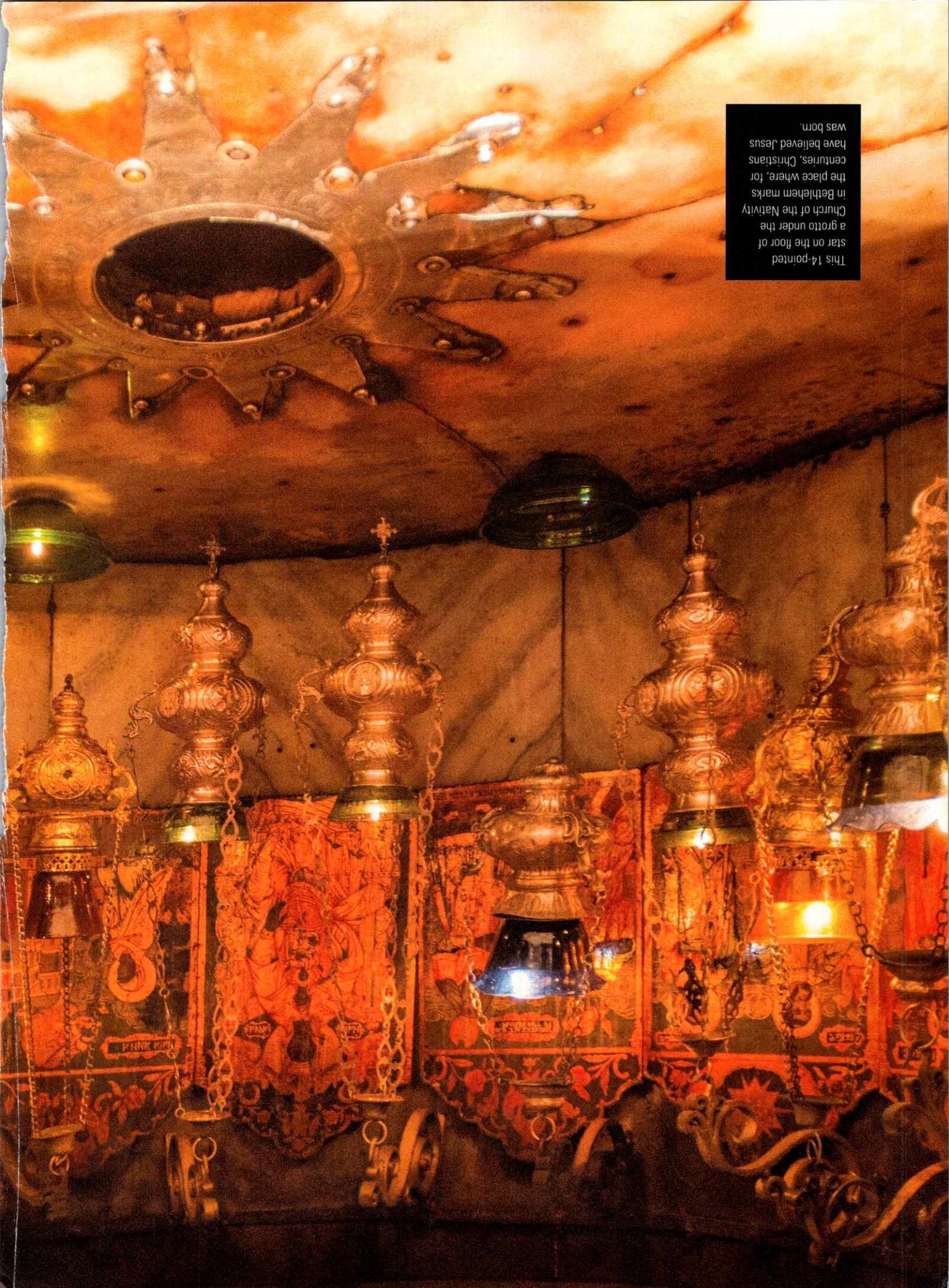
This is pure speculation, of course, based largely on etymology and context clues within the text. It's significant

to the biblical narrative, however, that David buys the famous threshing floor that becomes the staging area for Judean religious life from Araunah, who is a Jebusite. David's purchase becomes the ground of the Tabernacle and the place for the construction of Solomon's Temple. David did not conquer this holy ground: he bought it, used, from prior owners.

Since there's very little archaeological evidence for a real King David, it should come as no surprise that there's none whatsoever for the Jebusites. This has not stopped Middle Eastern politicians from claiming Jebusite ancestry. Yasser Arafat of the PLO argued that the Palestinian Arabs were direct descendants of the Jebusites and therefore had the supreme historical claim to authority over Jerusalem. Arafat's claim—which has been echoed by other Arabs—is not supported by genealogists or Levantine historians. It's a reminder that the race into an undefined past has no finish line, and a suggestion that legitimacy really ought to be bestowed by other means.



King David purchased a threshing field from Araunah, a Jebusite, shown here in a late 19th-century painting by William Brassey Hole. This suggests he took over rule of that area peacefully.



This 14-pointed star on the floor of a grotto under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem marks the place where Christians have believed Jesus was born.



Christmas story may be memorable, but they're also physically impermanent.

It is difficult enough for archaeologists to obtain and verify artifacts made of rock or clay. Wood and cloth are much greater challenges to preservation, and, of course, a birth leaves no trace in the stone. There have not been many attempts to dig at the Church of the Nativity. Investigations done during the 19th and early 20th centuries contributed to our understanding of church construction and renovation during the first millennium CE. Archaeologists did not unearth evidence of an inn, or a manger, or anything else that would link the house of worship to the Gospel stories.

Yet it is clear that a shrine has stood on the spot for a very long time. A mosaic floor found beneath the current floor of the Church of the Nativity belonged to an earlier structure—one that was probably financed by Helena, the mother of Constantine, the emperor

who converted the Roman Empire to Christianity. The revered early Christian writers Jerome and Justin Martyr both placed the nativity in a Bethlehem cave, which suggests that similar stories were widely circulated. It is very likely that Helena ordered the construction of the shrine atop the very cavern where believers assumed that Mary had given birth.

If the tale is literally true, it could not have been a comfortable beginning. The grottoes beneath the Church of the Nativity are dark and secluded—no place for a woman in labor. The presence of the manger in Luke's Gospel indicates that the family was in close quarters with animals: a humble beginning indeed for a prophet and teacher who would always face adversity.

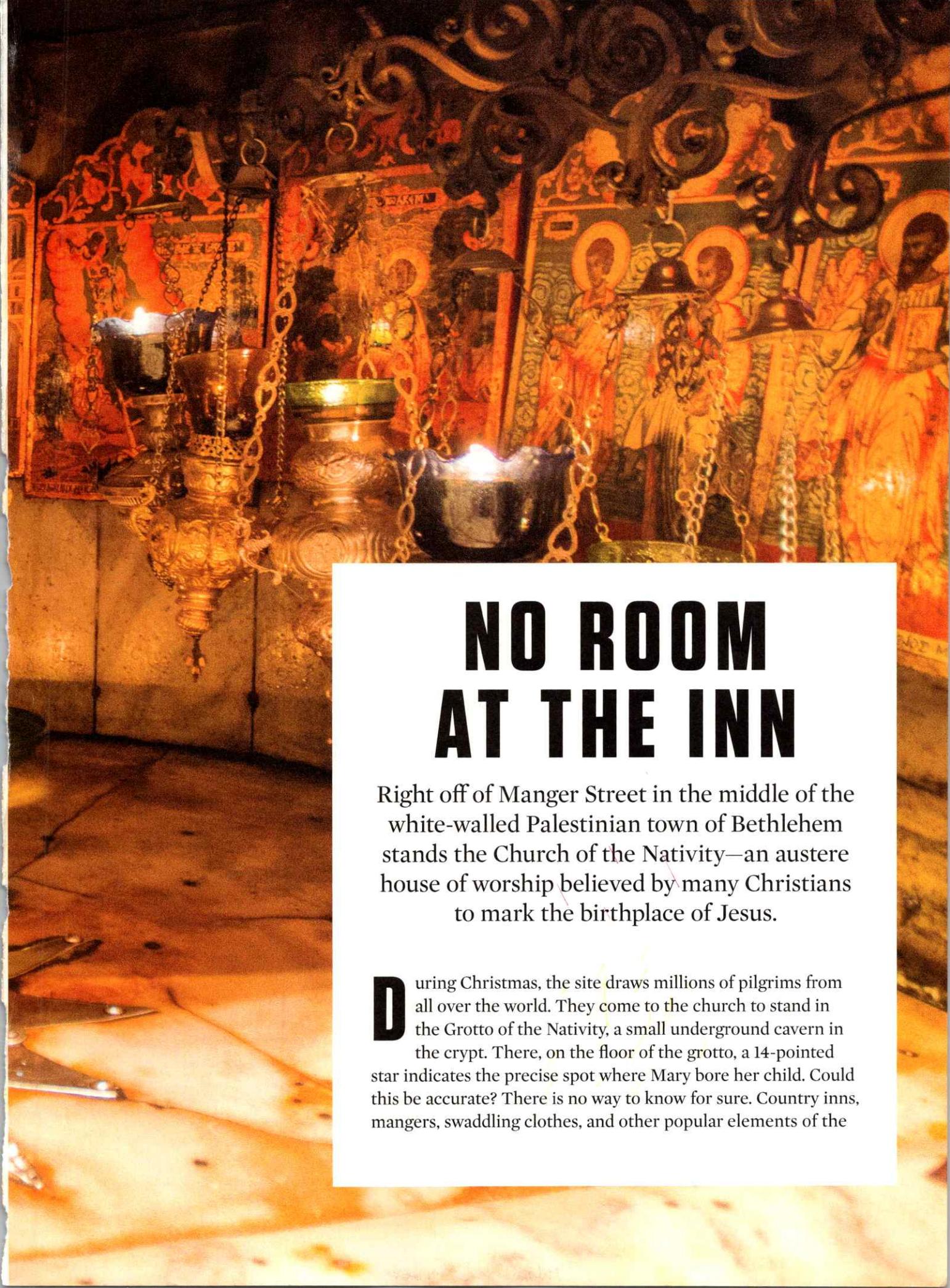
A CHILD OF GALILEE

Faith in his divinity varies. Most scholars, however, do not doubt that a man called Jesus of Nazareth once walked the earth. Versions of the Jesus story are preserved in four Gospels of the New Testament

This small chapel in a grotto under the Church of Nativity shows the cramped, rough conditions of Jesus's presumed place of birth.

and many other texts that didn't make the cut. Paul, author of the New Testament epistles, never met Jesus in person, but he knew people who had—including Jesus's brother James, the elder of the congregation in Jerusalem. The writings of the 1st-century historian Josephus may well have been doctored by Christians, but some of his references to Jesus appear to be legitimate.

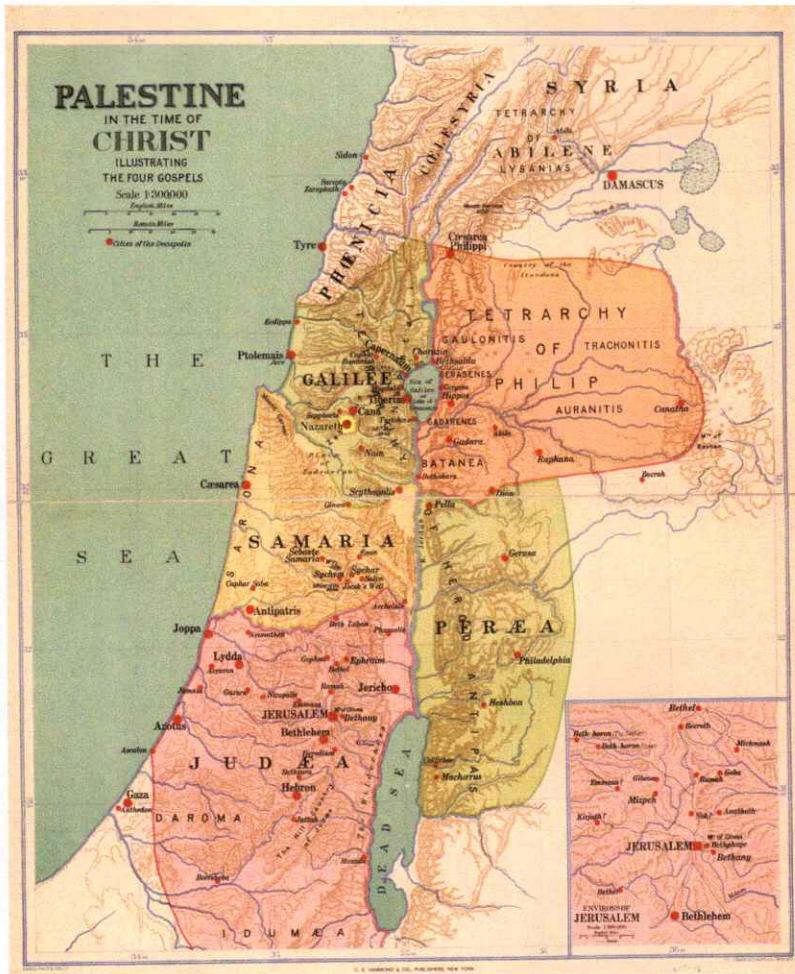
Can archaeology tell us anything about an itinerant preacher from a small village in Galilee? Indeed it can. We may never be able to isolate specifics about Jesus's life, but we can attempt to reconstruct the environment through which he moved. Between 1955 and 1960,



NO ROOM AT THE INN

Right off of Manger Street in the middle of the white-walled Palestinian town of Bethlehem stands the Church of the Nativity—an austere house of worship believed by many Christians to mark the birthplace of Jesus.

During Christmas, the site draws millions of pilgrims from all over the world. They come to the church to stand in the Grotto of the Nativity, a small underground cavern in the crypt. There, on the floor of the grotto, a 14-pointed star indicates the precise spot where Mary bore her child. Could this be accurate? There is no way to know for sure. Country inns, mangers, swaddling clothes, and other popular elements of the



Nazareth was a poor hamlet in thriving 1st-century Galilee. But it was a small town on a large trade route, which may have given young Jesus exposure to many travelers.

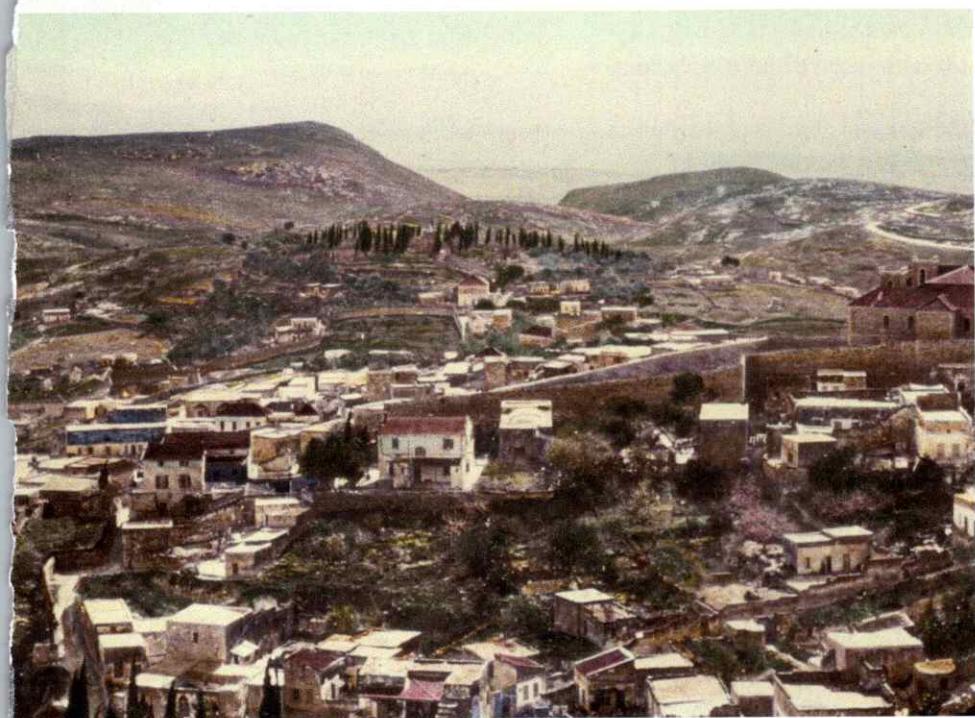
BOTTOM: In the 1950s, priest and archaeologist Bellarmino Bagatti conducted excavations around Nazareth, shown here during that era, and unearthed agricultural equipment dating back to the 1st century, giving us a glimpse into Jesus's time.

the Franciscan Catholic priest and archaeologist Bellarmino Bagatti conducted a thorough excavation in Nazareth and unearthed olive presses, cisterns, millstones, and other tools characteristic of small-scale agriculture. During the time of Jesus's ministry, Nazareth was poor: in wealth, in technology, in prospects for the people living there.

Yet it is probably not accurate to see Jesus as an isolated peasant. First-century Nazareth may have been a tiny hamlet, but it was not far removed from the Roman administrative center of the region and the culture it brought with it. Farmland in the lower Galilee was fertile and productive, and the land around Nazareth was densely populated. Historians trace a major trade route through Galilee, and the young Jesus must have felt the reverberations from the hoofbeats of the caravans. Life in his hometown might have been slow and simple, but it is very likely that he was exposed to ideas from greater Palestine and beyond.

THE ROAD TO JUDEA

It is worth wondering why the parents of a child living in such a





cosmopolitan region would need to travel all the way to Bethlehem to give birth. The Gospel of Luke provides an answer, even if it is not an altogether satisfying one. Joseph and Mary, we are told, made the journey to Bethlehem in order to comply with a census and taxation decree from Emperor Augustus. As a descendant of the House of David, Joseph was required to take his place alongside his ancestors in the hill country of Judea to be counted. This would have been a three-day trip, away from a verdant region of Palestine and toward a drier, rockier, more inhospitable one.

There is no hospitality to be found in Bethlehem, however. The couple's eventual retreat to an inn—or a cave, if the Church of the Nativity is correct—suggests that

Joseph's extended family was not there to receive him. Compliance with the emperor's order puts mother and child in jeopardy, far away from the comforts of home and the sophisticated towns surrounding Nazareth.

Josephus does record a Roman census in his history of the period. Unfortunately, the dates are awkward. While Luke takes pains to tell his reader that the count happened during the rule of Quirinius in Syria, it is generally accepted by historians that Quirinius did not ascend to power until 6 CE. Although it is possible that Quirinius also ruled in Syria during the time of Jesus's birth, there is no record of it, and it would have been unusual for a Roman proconsul to

administer government in the same province twice. There is also the bureaucratic illogic of the decree itself: forcing everyone to return to ancestral homes during a census would create a travel nightmare. A 2nd-century Roman census decree recovered from Egypt is ambiguous—but it seems to direct workers back to their current residences, not the land of their forefathers.

There is another explanation. Luke may have been trying to align Jesus's birth with prophecy—particularly the words of the Book of Micah, which expects Israel's redeemer to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew take pains to present genealogies of Jesus and Joseph that present



Though Jesus's birth is popularly placed in a cave or manger in Bethlehem, as shown here in a 16th-century painting by Girolamo da Carpi, neither Mark nor John mention Bethlehem in their gospels.

life is framed by northern Israel: it is part of his identity as a preacher, and many of his miracles were performed near the shores of Lake Galilee. If Oshri is right, the family would never have had to travel to the south at all.

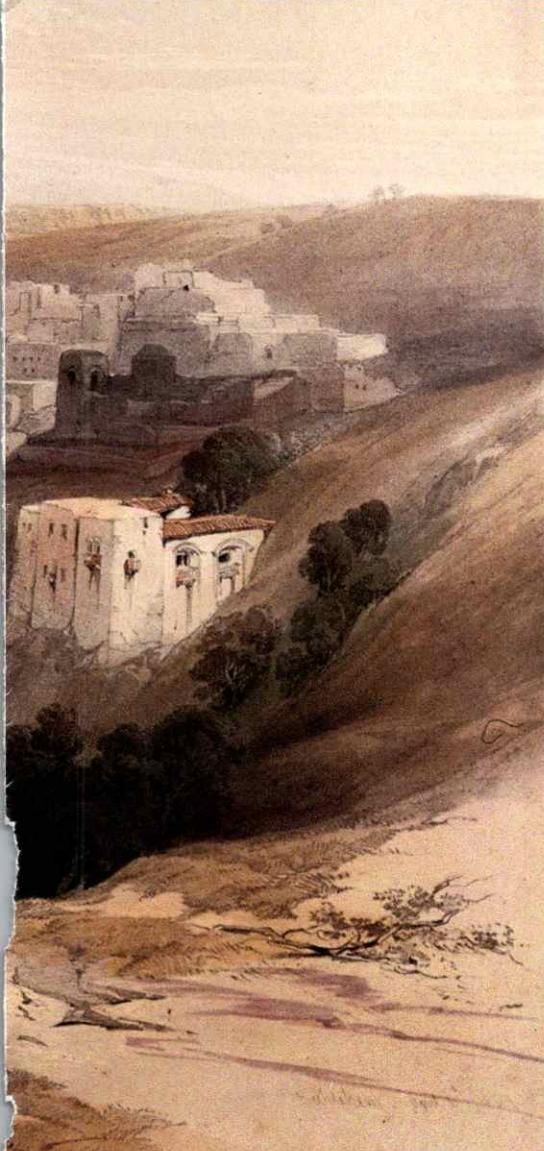
The archaeologist believes that his 11-year excavation supports his claim. Oshri found shards of stone vessels at Bethlehem of Galilee with features characteristic of the kind of tableware used by Jewish communities at the time of Jesus. The ruins of a large stone barrier surround Bethlehem of Galilee, and Oshri is convinced that this is the wall that Emperor Justinian built to protect the holy

birthplace. Remnants of a sizable church testify to the presence of a Christian congregation in Bethlehem of Galilee in the first centuries CE. Beneath the structure: a natural cavern, as suitable for a manger as anything at the Church of the Nativity.

The more famous Bethlehem, Oshri insists, shows no sign of ever standing behind a perimeter wall. Moreover, although the area around Bethlehem has been inhabited for centuries, there isn't any proof that there was a Jewish community in the town—or a town at all—at the time of Jesus's birth. Bethlehem, or Beit Lechem, means "house of bread," a generic descriptor

that applied to many agricultural towns. Perhaps David, too, has been misplaced by his biographers.

It is a seductive theory, but Oshri's colleagues at the IAA aren't convinced. Uzi Dahari, another archaeologist, doubts that there is anything distinctive about the church in Bethlehem of Galilee. He sees it as another one of the many houses of worship financed by Helena in the wake of the conversion of the empire. Pilgrims seeking the traces of Jesus would do better to direct themselves to still-humble Nazareth—the most likely, and most logical, birthplace of the prophet and teacher who turned Western religion upside-down. ■



The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Jerusalem, depicted here by Louis Haghe, ca. 1843, would have taken Mary and Joseph three days over difficult, hilly terrain, only to find no room at the inn when they arrived.

RIGHT: Much of Jesus's early preaching and miracles took place in northern Israel and on the shores of Lake Galilee. Aviram Oshri, a member of the Israel Antiquities Authority, posits that Jesus was born in this area—in Bethlehem of Galilee instead of Bethlehem of Jerusalem.

them as David's descendants; Matthew, who also places the birth in Bethlehem, offers a somewhat different lineage than Luke does, but his motivation for tracing the bloodline is similar. A link between the Messiah, King David, and the patriarchs needs to be established. Notably, neither the Gospel of Mark nor the Gospel of John mentions Bethlehem at all.

The discrepancies between the Gospel account of the census and the historical record have provided skeptics with a critique. Luke's clear desire to associate Jesus with King David only reinforces that critique. Without a clear scientific link between Jesus and the city of Bethlehem in the Judean hills, speculation is bound to continue—and at least one archaeologist is convinced that we've been looking in the wrong place for 2,000 years.

A NORTHERN ALTERNATIVE?

Aviram Oshri is not a boat-rocker by nature: he's a senior member

of the Israel Antiquities Authority, guardian of artifacts and the final word on their authenticity. His excavations north of Nazareth have been done by the book. Nevertheless, he's come to an unorthodox conclusion. Oshri is positive that the Church of the Nativity is not Jesus's birthplace. He believes that Jesus was born in Bethlehem—but not the Bethlehem we've come to recognize. Bethlehem of Galilee is a small, unassuming town roughly 20 miles west of Nazareth. It is here, not in the better-known Bethlehem to the immediate south of Jerusalem, that Oshri believes Mary gave birth to the object of Christian veneration.

Oshri's explanation is appealing in its tidiness and narrative integrity. It would have taken Joseph and Mary three hours to travel by donkey from their home to Bethlehem of Galilee—a much more plausible journey for a pregnant woman to take than the lengthy and difficult sojourn to the Judean hills. Jesus's whole early





The Holy Grail, believed to have been used at either the Last Supper (depicted in this 17th-century Spanish mural by Juan de Sevilla Romero) or at the Crucifixion does not appear anywhere in the Bible—but has nonetheless become a central theme in art and literature through the centuries.

BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Bethlehem Bulla

Although Bethlehem is mentioned more than 40 times across many Bible stories, the song sung by scripture is not echoed by the stones. Lack of physical evidence for the ancient town has made it difficult for archaeologists to corroborate or even support the stories in the Gospels. But a recent discovery has given hope to those who believe that proof of biblical Bethlehem is right under the rocks.

At 1.5 centimeters in width, the Bethlehem Bulla is barely bigger than a nickel. Its historical significance is belied by its size: the name of Bethlehem is plainly carved into the surface of the clay seal. Archaeologist Eli Shukron discovered the bulla while sifting through the debris in the Old City of Jerusalem. The little stone dates to the 7th or 8th century BCE—which makes the seal the first confirmation that a city called Bethlehem stood in Canaan before the Babylonian Exile.

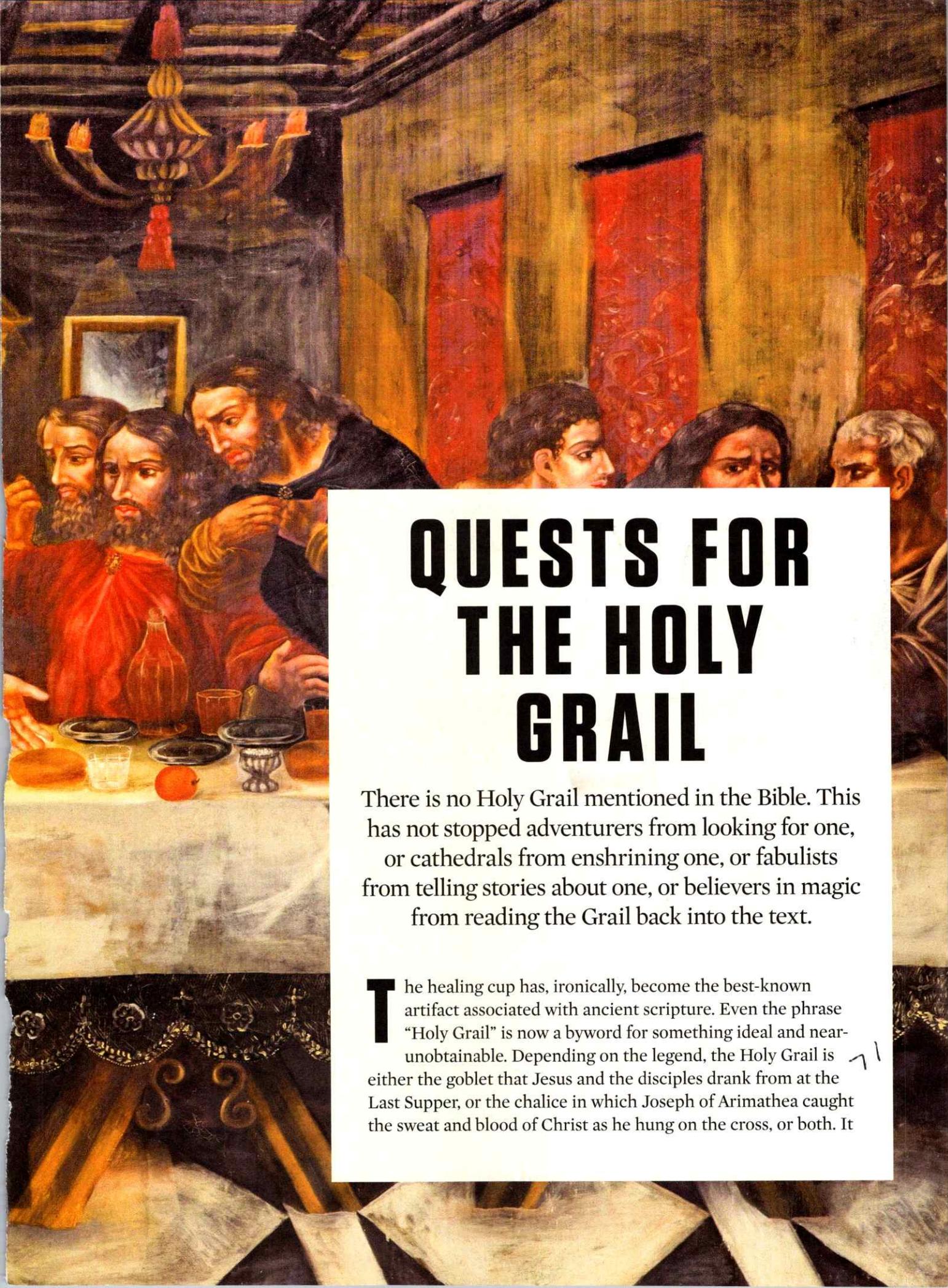
The inscription on the seal is short, but it packs a great deal of meaning into its three lines. It attests to a shipment sent to the king in Jerusalem—probably Hezekiah, Manasseh, or Josiah—by traders in a city called Bethlehem. The bulla was used to seal

and authenticate tax payments, and it could have been used on envelopes or containers. The find demonstrates that Bethlehem was a satellite town that owed fealty to Jerusalem—just as the Bible implies.

We can't know whether the Bethlehem of the bulla is the same Bethlehem of the Gospels. In addition to the Bethlehem in Galilee excavated by Aviram Oshri, the biblical Book of Joshua mentions a third Bethlehem in the territory of the tribe of Zebulun, which is located in northern Israel. There may have been other Bethlehems as well. But given the proximity of the Bethlehem of Judah—the New Testament's Bethlehem—to Jerusalem, it does not feel too presumptuous to assume that the bulla came from Jesus's traditional birthplace.



This tiny clay seal clearly has the name Bethlehem carved onto it, proving that a town of Bethlehem really did exist in Jerusalem, just as the Bible says.



QUESTS FOR THE HOLY GRAIL

There is no Holy Grail mentioned in the Bible. This has not stopped adventurers from looking for one, or cathedrals from enshrining one, or fabulists from telling stories about one, or believers in magic from reading the Grail back into the text.

The healing cup has, ironically, become the best-known artifact associated with ancient scripture. Even the phrase "Holy Grail" is now a byword for something ideal and near-unobtainable. Depending on the legend, the Holy Grail is either the goblet that Jesus and the disciples drank from at the Last Supper, or the chalice in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the sweat and blood of Christ as he hung on the cross, or both. It

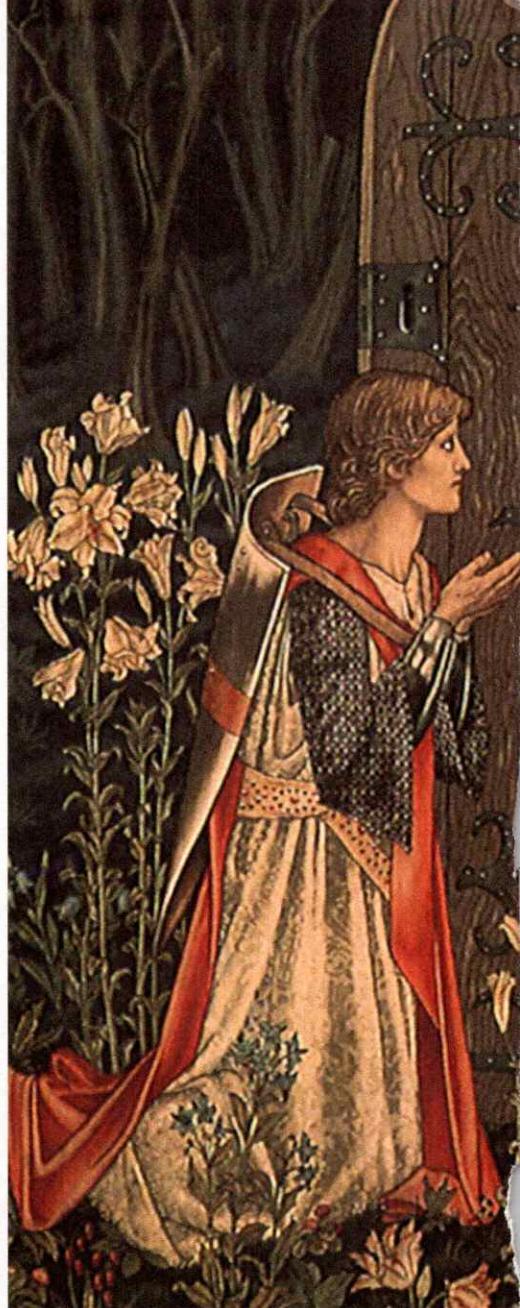
is not so different, then, from the many other relics of Jesus's life and death that draw visitors to churches in droves. Very few of these relics have been authenticated or even closely examined by archaeologists, and it is clear why that is: it would be difficult indeed to determine whether Jesus's lips ever graced a particular cup.

But the relics are artifacts of a sort. They accumulate stories as surely as a potsherd accumulates dust. Thick layers of narrative surround the Holy Grail. Digging through those layers does yield a trove of cultural observations. We can learn about the ways in which Christian storytelling intersects with Celtic mythology—particularly the tales of Arthur, the legendary British king, and his Round Table knights. Grail stories tell us about our fascinations: Templars, secret societies, conspiracy theories, the spiritual realm. It is a symbol

that speaks straight to the collective unconscious, and it surely will continue to inspire searchers of all kinds for centuries to come.

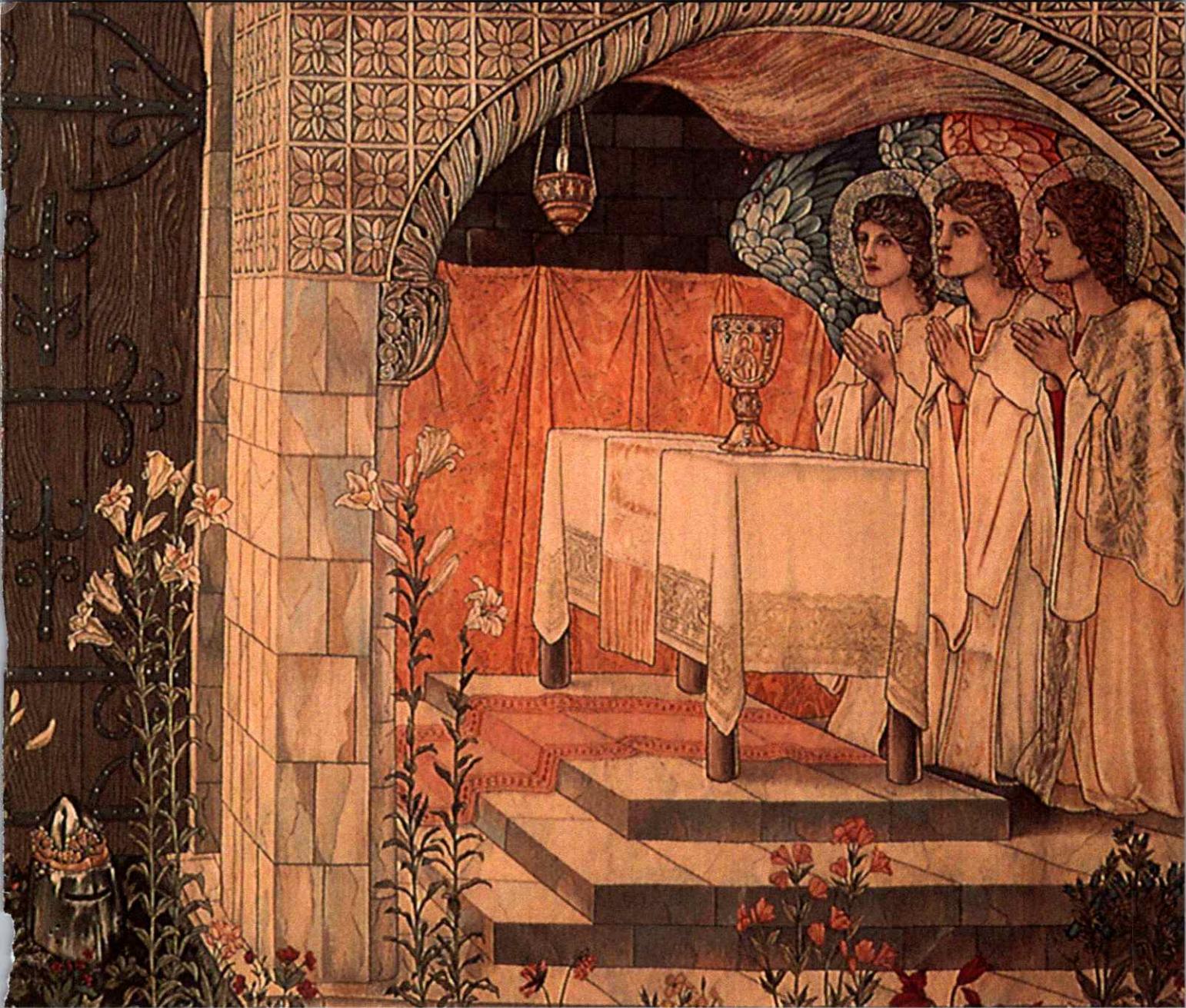
CHALICE AND GRAIL

In the beginning there was a cup. Jesus and his disciples, poor men all, could not have afforded anything fancy. A drinking vessel at a Last Supper surely would have been a modest thing: made of wood or clay, functional rather than ornamental. After the Crucifixion, the whereabouts of this vessel became obscure, and understandably so—it was not the time to be thinking about tableware. But veneration of all things related to Christ became general, and the cup became known as the Holy Chalice. Like all relics and artifacts, it was sought. One tradition holds that Peter, who was present at the Last Supper, brought the cup to Rome. During the persecutions of the mid-3rd



In the 12th century, the Celtic tradition about a magical cup pursued by King Arthur and his knights was blended with the Holy Chalice. In this 1890 tapestry by Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, and John Henry, Sir Lancelot has succeeded in finding the Holy Grail.

The cup used at the Last Supper was likely a very simple cup, perhaps like the one in this fresco, as Jesus and his followers were not wealthy men.



century, it was spirited away to Spain and hidden from the imperial authorities.

In Celtic Europe, there is also a long tradition of a magical cup. The Celtic cup is associated with fertility and femininity, renewal, eternal youth, and the Arthurian court, and it features in old stories with very little Christian signification. Our earliest-known reference to a grail comes from a French romance concerning the Welsh Arthurian knight Perceval. It was not until the 12th century CE that writers began conflating the cup of the Celts with the Holy

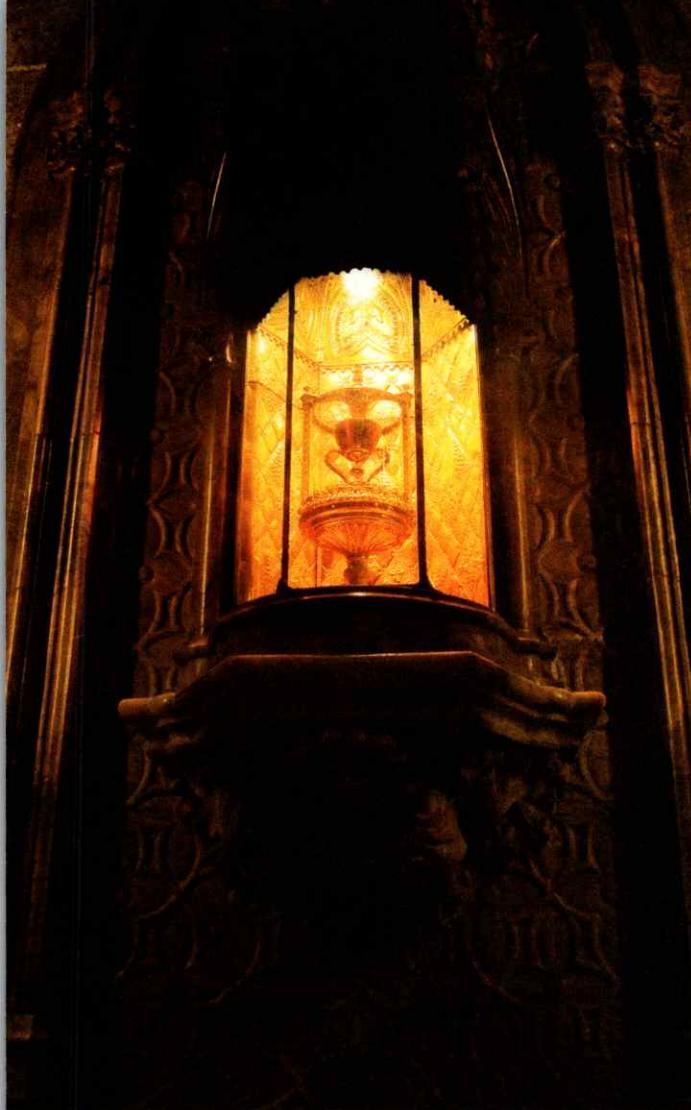
Chalice. Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathe* poured the contents of both legends into one container and mixed them together. Poets and storytellers—Dan Brown, Susan Cooper, *Monty Python*, and many others—have been drinking from that cup ever since.

THE IBERIAN CONNECTION

But what about that earlier rumor—the one that bypasses the Celts altogether? Was the Grail stashed in the Iberian hills by a zealous knight? Several churches in Spain would like you to believe so. But

of all the competing grails in Europe—and there are roughly 200—none is more famous than the one on display in the Valencia Cathedral. Finding this grail is as easy as paying a visit to the Chapel of the Holy Chalice: there the cup stands, bathed in amber light, in the center of the alabaster altarpiece.

The Chalice at Valencia Cathedral is no modest drinking vessel. The cup is connected to its base by curved golden handles, and the stand is festooned with gems. The Chalice is impressive enough to be a persistent papal prop: several pontiffs have used it during services,



including John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It is doubtful that Jesus and the disciples would have drunk from a goblet as ornate as this one. The Valencia Cathedral has an explanation: only the plain agate top of the cup is the True Grail. The rest is ornamentation.

Work on the Valencia Cathedral began in the 13th century. The famous chalice in the reliquary was listed among the inventory of the monastery of San Juan de la Peña in the 11th century. That leaves more than a millennium unaccounted for. Yet the Church stands by its tradition: The Chalice traveled to Rome with St. Peter and was brought to Huesca in Spain during the persecution of Christians. When Iberia fell under Muslim control in the 8th century, the Chalice was moved to the monastery for safekeeping. The date of the agate

cup checks out, too: it was wrought in the 1st century CE.

Four hundred miles across Castile, another impressive cup stands in another medieval church: the Basilica of San Isidoro in León. The Chalice of Doña Urraca is even gaudier than its competitor in Valencia—the gilding is more intricate, the jewels more prominent, the base material (striated onyx) dearer. It is hard to imagine it in the hand of a humble preacher, but it certainly suits the King of Kings.

Since the 2014 publication of *Kings of the Grail*, the Basilica of San Isidoro has been busy with curiosity-seekers. The authors of *Kings* thread the Chalice's narrative through Islamic territory—from 11th-century Jerusalem to Egypt to a Spanish Muslim prince to Ferdinand I. When the two historians discovered

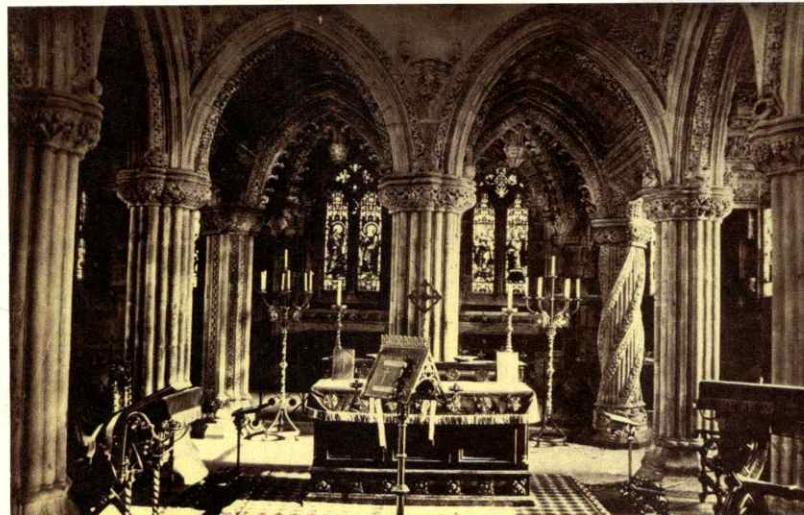


RIGHT: The base of the Chalice of Doña Urraca from the Basilica of San Isidoro in León, Spain, is made of striated onyx, an unlikely material for the real cup from the Last Supper, but it has become a popular contender for status as the Holy Grail.

LEFT: The ornate grail at the Valencia Cathedral in Spain is thought to have been brought there by St. Peter for safekeeping. The church maintains the simple agate at the top is the True Grail; the rest is decoration.



LEFT and BELOW: The ornate, intricate, and heavily symbolic carvings that cover practically every inch of the Rosslyn Chapel's interior have fueled the rumors about the church.



the order unearth on the Temple Mount? No one knows for sure, but rumors have persisted through the centuries. Some speculators believe the Knights carried off a piece of the Cross, the Copper Scroll of Qumran, or the Ark of the Covenant. Others are certain that the Templars found the Holy Grail.

In 1187, Saladin conquered Jerusalem. The Knights Templar would carry on the fight for another century, but the Temple Mount—and, eventually, Palestine—was lost to them. The Templar Order established a base in Paris in the early 14th century, and there

they soon became a site of royal suspicion. (The king may have been insulted that the Knights would not lend him any money.) A full-scale Templar persecution began: Knights were imprisoned, tortured, and burned at the stake, and the Order's assets were seized by the state.

Most scholars believe that was, effectively, the end of the Templars, who vanish from the main stage of European history after their official dissolution by the pope in 1312. But those of a more conspiratorial bent believe that the Templar Order simply went underground and continued to apply its muscle from

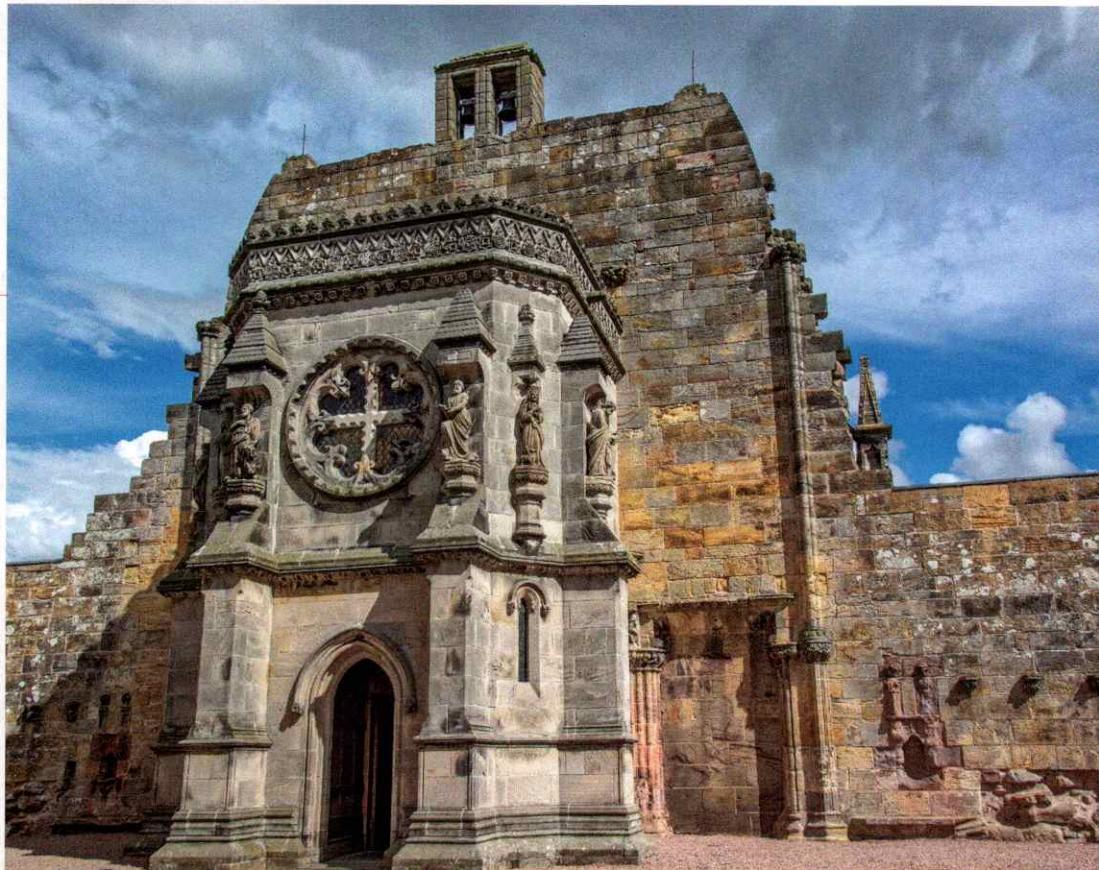
the shadows. And if some Templars made it out of Paris, it follows that they took their treasures with them.

But where? Grail hunters have long claimed a Templar connection with the modest Rosslyn Chapel in Roslin, Scotland, a small town just south of Edinburgh. There, in a deep vault behind a stone wall of a crypt, the Templars have sealed up their artifacts. The vault and the crypt have been found—but only in books and movies.

Nevertheless, belief in the stories has been reinforced by the strange decorations and carvings crammed madly on every inch of wallspace in Rosslyn Chapel. These statues draw from a much wider vocabulary of signs and symbols than the one that resonated with medieval Christians—there is, for instance, a pagan god, a dance macabre, and a series of stone blocks that might represent a musical score. It is probably not possible to visit Rosslyn Chapel without coming away with a conspiracy theory, or just a different way of seeing things. It's the ideal state of mind to get swept up in the unquenchable, impossible quest for the Holy Grail. ■

Grail hunters believe the Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland has a connection to the Templars and a yet-discovered vault of treasures, potentially including the Holy Grail.

BOTTOM: The Knights Templar were once headquartered on the Temple Mount and are rumored to have collected many treasures and artifacts from the chambers beneath it—including the Holy Grail.



a pair of ancient parchments in a Cairo library that described a grail that matched the description of the upper half of the Chalice of Doña Urraca, their search began.

Like many modern-day quests for the Grail—and many in literature, too—theirs had the contours of a treasure hunt. They had a map, and clues, and a desire to probe the shadier precincts of history. The Grail is often something hidden, misunderstood, or denied by authorities for suspicious reasons. A Grail hunt requires a secret mission—and no group in medieval history oozes secrecy quite as powerfully as the Templars do.

WHO WERE THE TEMPLARS?

The Knights Templar began as a private security force. They patrolled the roads of Crusader-governed

Jerusalem, making sure that Christian pilgrims were safe from bandits and unbelievers. By the early 12th century, they'd made themselves indispensable to the king of Jerusalem—and a potent force in the Crusader armies. By the middle of the century, they'd become very wealthy indeed.

Baldwin II, the king of Jerusalem during the early days of the Templar Order, stationed the Knights on the Temple Mount. For three quarters of a century, the Knights Templar maintained their headquarters on some of the holiest ground in Christianity and Judaism. They were free to explore the catacombs and the ruins of Herod's Temple and add the relics they found there to the growing Templar treasury; given the aggressive disposition of the Templars, it's unlikely they'd pass up the chance to try. What did



all those who did not believe wholeheartedly in relics.

There was, too, more than a little self-interest in that proclamation. A relic could make or break a chapel. A church with a good one—something related to the body of Christ, perhaps—might find itself on the itineraries of thousands of pilgrims. Towns on pilgrimage routes reaped economic benefits from the religious tourism that relics prompt. Many still do.

Items in reliquaries can now be carbon-dated. But for many centuries, there was no way to tell whether a relic was real. Relics were not presented to the public in the manner that an archaeologist might share her findings with her peers. The standard of evidence was not what it is in our skeptical age. Archaeologists establish the authenticity of their artifacts through comparison with the stones and earth that surround the subject

of their study; relics, by comparison, were authenticated by miracles. It is unfair, then, to treat a relic as we would an artifact. These sacred objects served a completely different purpose: they were meant to speak directly to the heart.

Many relics might seem macabre to modern audiences, especially those associated with Jesus's gruesome death. But many believers do feel closer to Christ, and the Christian story, after contemplating an object believed to be linked to Jesus and his followers. They seem to corroborate the creed in a manner that goes deeper than fact. It travels all the way to faith.

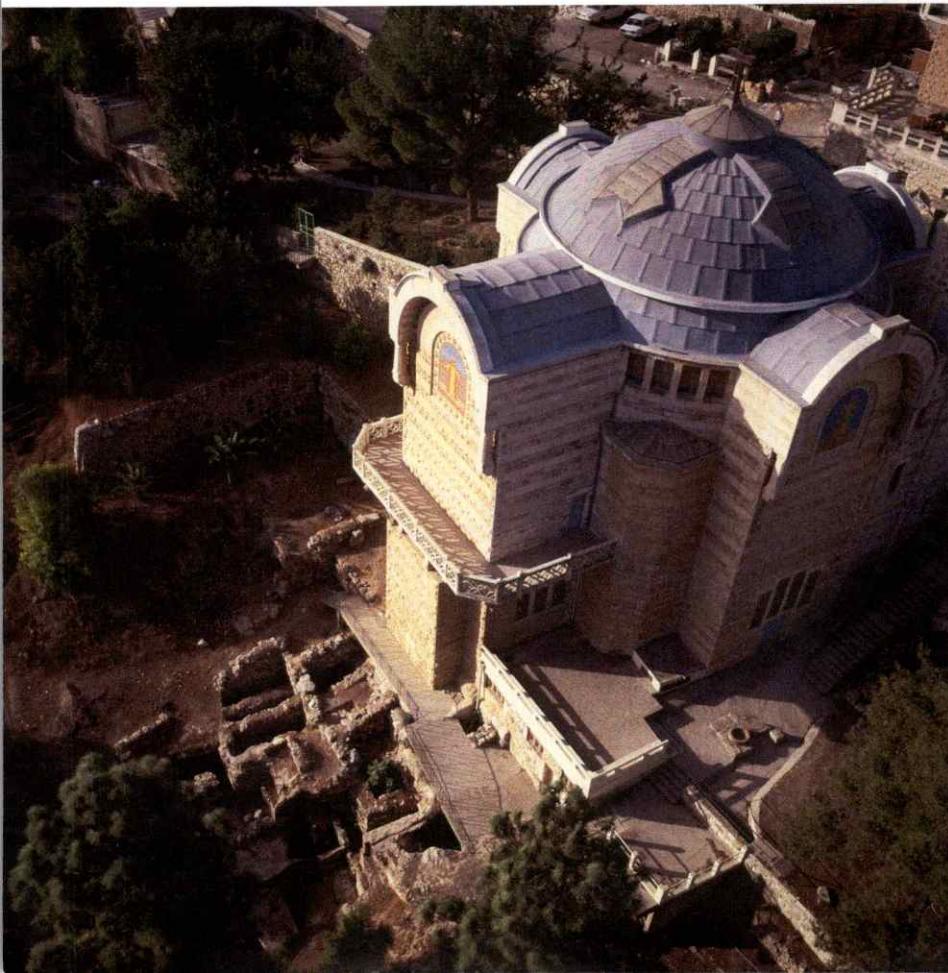
THE TRUE CROSS

In the first half of the 4th century—probably 325 or 326 CE—Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine of Rome, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She was there on imperial business: Constantine

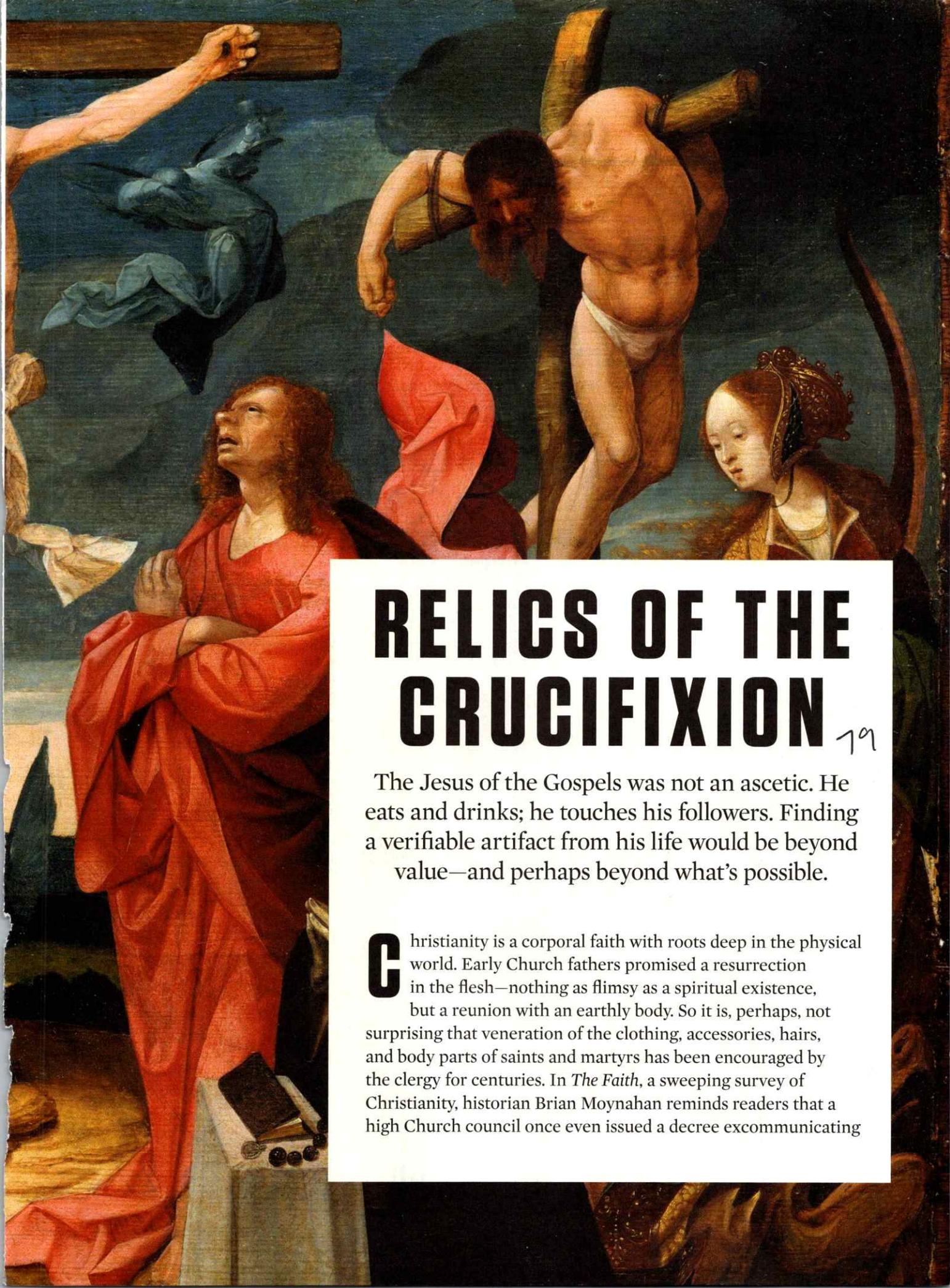
had made Christianity the state religion in 312, and he'd authorized Helena to restore holy places and collect artifacts and relics of Jesus. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, her chronicler, Helena did far more than that. She financed the construction of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of Eleona, site of Christ's ascension, on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. She ordered the destruction of a pagan temple to Venus on Calvary Hill, demanded an excavation beneath the ruins, and, according to tradition, came away with the very cross on which Christ had hung.

There is more than a whiff of the miraculous about the story of Helena, who has been canonized by the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. In some traditions, she also discovers the Holy Nails used to affix Jesus to the beams, finds Christ's sepulcher, and also locates the two other crosses that stood on Calvary. The excavators are able to determine which is the True Cross by a clever trick: they place a corpse on it, and it springs to life. In other versions of the story, a sick woman is cured by touching the proper Cross. To a modern skeptic, details like these might invalidate the story altogether; to a true believer, they confirm it.

Did Helena truly have supernatural adventures in Palestine? There is no historical evidence that she did. The earliest accounts of the True Cross don't mention Helena at all. The



The Church of Eleona, traditionally said to have been built by Helena, Constantine's mother, stands on the Mount of Olives, where Christ reportedly ascended to heaven.



RELICS OF THE CRUCIFIXION

19

The Jesus of the Gospels was not an ascetic. He eats and drinks; he touches his followers. Finding a verifiable artifact from his life would be beyond value—and perhaps beyond what's possible.

Christianity is a corporal faith with roots deep in the physical world. Early Church fathers promised a resurrection in the flesh—nothing as flimsy as a spiritual existence, but a reunion with an earthly body. So it is, perhaps, not surprising that veneration of the clothing, accessories, hairs, and body parts of saints and martyrs has been encouraged by the clergy for centuries. In *The Faith*, a sweeping survey of Christianity, historian Brian Moynahan reminds readers that a high Church council once even issued a decree excommunicating

BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Grail in Glastonbury

At the foot of the Glastonbury Tor in rural Somerset, England, there is a well that has been in use for more than two millennia. The Well at Glastonbury always contains water—even during times of extreme drought. Because of its reliability, the well has long been associated with renewal, the bounty of nature, fertility, and the feminine principle. It has long been a site of historical interest, and its decorative cover was designed by a well-known archaeologist: Frederick Bligh Bond. Bond, who excavated at Glastonbury in the early years of the 20th century, was also a spiritualist, and his design for the cover includes symbols redolent of the mysticism and legends of the British Isles. That includes a sword highly suggestive of Excalibur.

But the Well at Glastonbury also waters the dreams of Christian mystics. According to tradition, it was into the waters of Glastonbury that Joseph of Arimathea cast the chalice that caught the blood of Jesus. While those of a less poetic bent might insist that it is the iron in the Somerset hills that paints the water in the Well red, true believers know it is rust from the nails of the Crucifixion. The story of Joseph has given the spring its colloquial name:

The Well at Glastonbury has been in use for more than 2,000 years, and, according to tradition, Joseph of Arimathea threw the chalice that caught the blood of Jesus during the Crucifixion into the waters of Glastonbury.

the Chalice Well. There is, of course, not a shred of proof for the claim beyond the text, but William of Malmesbury's 1125 *Chronicle of the Kings of England* counts Joseph of Arimathea among the founders of the ancient and now-ruined Glastonbury Abbey.

Every Chalice story eventually becomes a Grail tale, and this one is no different. Glastonbury is regularly counted among the contenders for the site of the Holy Grail, even if its claim to the cup lacks an actual relic that visitors can see. Then again, the Well, its cover, and its environs are every bit as visually impressive as any jewel-encrusted goblet in a chapel reliquary. It is telling that the Chalice Well hosts annual celebrations on solstices and pagan holidays as well as Christmas and Easter: in these wondrous waters, all traditions dissolve.





Relics from the Crucifixion and Jesus's life abound in churches around the world, but substantiating their authenticity is a near-impossible task. There are also countless works of art dedicated to the Crucifixion, such as this ca. 1525 painting by Cornelis Engebrechtsz.



The True Cross is said to have been lost in the Battle of Hattin, 1187 CE, the final battle of the Third Crusade, shown in this medieval illumination, in which the Christian army surrenders to Saladin.



Treasures and churches around the world claim to have pieces of the True Cross, such as the Imperial Treasure, or *Kaiserliche Schatzkammer*, at the Hofburg Palace, Vienna, Austria.

TOP: Christ was crucified on Calvary Hill, called Golgotha at the time, and, according to tradition, Helena excavated the True Cross from this location.

excavation at the site may have been done by someone else and ascribed to Helena after the fact in order to build her legend.

Yet according to Christian tradition, the preserved Cross was indeed a relic of great interest in Jerusalem until the fall of the city to the Persians in 614 CE. Like the Holy City itself, the relic then changes hands many times: it is returned to the Church, hidden from the Arab invaders, seized by the Crusaders and made a living symbol of their Kingdom, and, finally, lost on the battlefield in 1187 by warriors who were using it as a totem and guarantor of victory over the sultan.

From there, the True Cross falls to pieces and scatters across the map in a great diaspora of shattered wood. Shards begin to appear in reliquaries across Europe and the Near East: Constantinople, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Notre Dame in Paris, Mount Athos in Greece, Venice, Ghent, and many other cities. Splinters of the True Cross keep getting stuck in the fingers of relic-hunters, and archaeologists, too—Professor Gülgün Köroğlu, director of the excavations at Balatlar Church in

northern Turkey, believed that he'd found one as recently as 2015.

We are reminded of the 16th-century theologian John Calvin, who wrote, acidly, that if all the pieces of the Cross that had been found were put together, it would make a mighty shipload. Like many hard-core Protestants, Calvin wasn't enthusiastic about relics. Those whose spiritual devotion is fired by curious objects will not be discouraged from carrying on the hunt.

THE SHROUD

Does Jesus speak to us through the True Cross? Could he act through physical objects that were present at the time of his greatest travail: the nails, the wood, the thorny crown, the cup to catch his sweat? Are these things pregnant with miracles? To many searchers, the answer must be yes. Some of the essence of the divine bled out of the dying man, and, through the relic, we can still apprehend it.

It is notable, however, that very early Christians did not share this perspective on the death of Jesus. Crucifixion was a horrible punishment reserved for the most

BEYOND THE BIBLE

Archaeological Evidence for Crucifixion

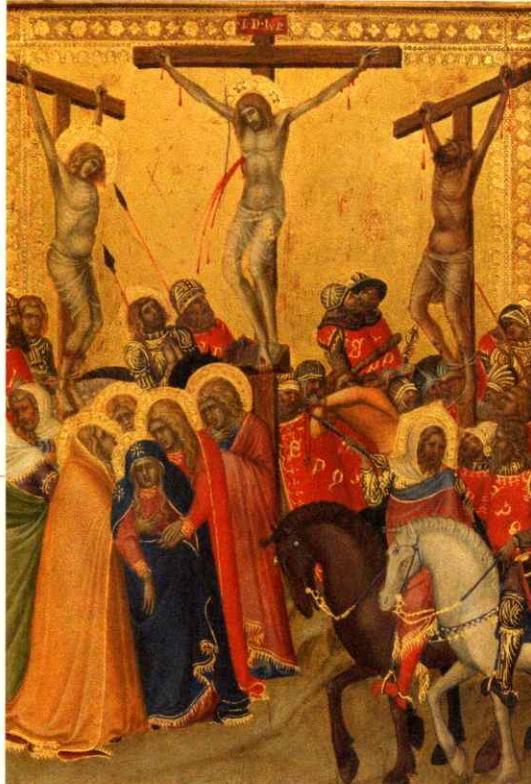
Chances are, you've seen hundreds, if not thousands, of crucifixions. All of these have been representations: in paintings, in films, in icons on the walls of churches, and in living rooms of the Catholic faithful. The cross is one of the most enduring symbols in Western art, and the story with which it is associated—the Passion—is as famous as any ever told. It's enough to make a person believe that crucifixions were commonplace.

But were they? How much archaeological evidence is there for the practice of crucifixion during the times in which Jesus lived? The answer: surprisingly little. While the literary record tells a gruesome tale, the stones (and bones) of the Near East have yet to back it up. Only one set of human remains from New Testament-era Palestine with trauma consistent with crucifixion has ever been unearthed.

We know his name. He was called Jehohanan Ben Khagqol. He was a contemporary of Jesus, and his ossuary was unearthed during a dig in East Jerusalem. A nail had been driven through his heel from the side, suggesting a slightly different posture

from the one we associate with the Passion. In order to hasten his death on the cross, both of his legs had been broken.

Physical verification for the practice is scarce. This does not mean that crucifixion wasn't widespread. Most injuries related to crucifixion would have affected soft tissue, so it isn't surprising that archaeologists haven't dug up bones pierced by nails. Those nails, too, were believed to have supernatural powers and were unlikely to have been left in the corpse. Most of all, crucifixion was a punishment reserved for society's most abject members. The crucified were not likely to receive the reward of a proper burial or commemoration in any way. In this regard—and in many others, too—Jesus of Nazareth was an atypical victim.



Although depictions of the Crucifixion, with all its brutality and gruesomeness (all of which is on display in this 1340s painting by Pietro Lorenzetti) abound in art, the practice of it as a form of execution was rare.

multiple editions of Old Testament books were in common currency during the New Testament era.

It's worth remembering that the Dead Sea Scrolls aren't autographs. Just like the books of our modern Bible, they're copies or transcriptions of older works. The departures from the stories that we know could be idiosyncratic variations, or they could be representative of major traditions that did not get canonized.

Only about a quarter of the texts discovered at Qumran are biblical; other scrolls include apocrypha and commentary, a manual on discipline, a manual of military strategy, and a copper sheet that might be a treasure map. Some of these texts have nothing to do with Scripture, others have tangential relevance, and others seem like candidates for

inclusion in the Bible. How did our ancestors decide what deserved to be part of the Holy Book and what ought to be excised?

DISCOVERY AT NAG HAMMADI

Jabal al-Tārif in Upper Egypt shares much with Qumran: it is an inhospitable highland dotted with caves, and its scorching, dry climate is ideal for preserving scrolls. In 1945, an Arab peasant searching for soil near Jabal al-Tārif instead discovered an earthenware jar filled with ancient papyrus books. This find, which is often called the Nag Hammadi Library after the Egyptian town that neighbors the discovery site, included 52 rare texts from the first part of the first millennium CE. Some of them were Gospels.



Abraxas, shown here in a reproduction from a 3rd-century engraving, was the personification of the spiritual knowledge Gnostics believed would bring them salvation.



In 1947, a shepherd made a discovery in the Qumran Caves near Jerusalem that would change how the world thinks about the Bible.

These were not, however, the Gospels to which we are accustomed. Christ is a central figure in many of the texts, but instead of the universal, cosmic teaching of the New Testament, he is presented as a private instructor to a select group, a possessor of secret knowledge he shares only with initiates.

Some of the contents of the codices in the Nag Hammadi Library stand the Bible on its head: *The Testimony of Truth*, for instance, retells the story of the Garden of Eden from the perspective of the Serpent. In *The Apocryphon of John*, which features a demonic spirit named Yaldabaoth, Christ tells his disciple that it was he who caused Adam to eat from the Tree of Life.

What is going on here? These texts explore ideas and concepts associated with Gnosticism—a largely forgotten variant of Christianity

that was surprisingly popular during the 2nd century CE. The Gnostics did not place emphasis on sin. They believed that salvation was attainable only through *gnosis*, or knowledge, rather than faith and repentance. To Gnostics, the material world was evil, so the creator God who appears in the Old Testament could not possibly be the Almighty. Some Gnostic Christians rejected the Old Testament altogether.

The early Church, in turn, rejected the Gnostics. The teaching of the Gnostic leaders was declared heresy, and the sects were suppressed. By the 3rd century CE, Gnosticism was in decline; by the fall of the Roman Empire, it had been absorbed into other faiths. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library was a striking glimpse of a road not traveled for Christianity, and a reminder that the contours of a religion are defined as much by what is excluded from orthodoxy as they are by its official creed.

THE HUNT FOR Q

In *Surpassing Wonder*, an erudite study of ancient religious texts, historian Donald Harman Akenson provides a page-long list of devotional books and Gospels

The Nag Hammadi codices comprise 52 rare texts from the early 1st century, and their stories differ in many ways from the Gospels we know.

