Looking for Arameans at Tel Abel Beth Maacah

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By definition, Biblical archaeology seeks to unearth remains that illuminate the Bible (and other ancient Near Eastern texts). The results may corroborate or refute what these texts claim, but the quest is certainly guided by our desire to get closer to the *realia* of ancient life, be it quotidian or historical.

We modern archaeologists pride ourselves in our ability to move beyond simplistic equations of "text and spade" or "pots and people," however. Our goal is to ask more complex questions about the past, even if it means living with the uncertainty of ambivalent answers.

This was the situation when we began the adventure of excavating the imposing and hitherto untouched mound of Abel Beth Maacah in northern Israel, straddling the borders of Israel, Lebanon and Syria. Its strategic border location in antiquity, alongside Biblical references to Maacah as an Aramean entity, prompted us to embark on a quest for Arameans as one of our research questions. While a "pots equal people" approach is not a realistic or desirable research agenda, we nevertheless wanted to explore the possible correlation between Biblical references to Maacah as related to an Aramean kingdom and the material culture unearthed at our site.

As is often the case, reality proved to be infinitely more complex—on two levels: the archaeological and the historical/textual. On the archaeological level, we targeted Iron I (c. 1200–1000 B.C.E.) and especially Iron IIA (c. 1000–586 B.C.E.) as the key periods for Aramean presence. On the historical/textual level, we were guided by Biblical references to the Arameans and multiple historical reconstructions of the role played by these rather enigmatic people during the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. From a methodological standpoint, it is easier to make inferences about the cuisine and food preparation at a site, or to determine whether a site was urban or nonurban at a particular time in history, than to ask whether the inhabitants of Abel Beth Maacah were Aramean or Israelite. Ethnicity or nationality is notoriously elusive in the archaeological record.

Two seasons of excavation in 2013 and 2014 in the lower and middle mound yielded dense Iron I occupation (as well as significant Late and Middle Bronze Age remains). By contrast, the Iron II remains were limited to scattered sherds and pits. The upper mound, which covers about one-third of the site on the north, proved to be even trickier. Given the lofty height of the summit, we expected an Iron Age citadel in this strategic location, which enemies like the Assyrians or Arameans (if the site was Israelite) would encounter after passing through the narrow defile south of the Lebanese Beq'a Valley. Today, the summit of the northern tell is covered by a modern military bunker and, as we learned in a probe carried out this past season, this extensive military system made it impossible to reach earlier remains at that point. But not all is lost. A massive stone wall on the eastern slope of the upper mound that was partially cleared during the 2014 season produced some Iron II sherds. While only full excavation can provide us with the answers we need, this intriguing wall may help us identify stratified Iron Age II remains—and perhaps hints to the Arameans—in the future.

On the historical/textual level, we are well aware of the complex literary and ideological nature of the evidence. The picture proved to be a tapestry woven from the "stratification" of the Biblical texts, complicated by the unfortunate lacunae in the archaeological record in key comparative areas, such as Lebanon and southern Syria, the latter being the heartland of Aram-Damascus in Iron IIA.

The twin kingdoms of Geshur and Maacah, mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, were presumably located in the Golan Heights and its environs and were associated with the Arameans in one way or another during the period of the Israelite kingdom. The site name of Abel Beth Maacah suggests an affinity to Maacah, and thus to an Aramean identity, though in the few direct Biblical references to

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Maacah (2 Samuel 10:6, 8) and Aram-Maacah (1 Chronicles 19:6), the town itself is never mentioned in relation to this kingdom.

All of the specific references to Abel Beth Maacah imply that it was Israelite, as in the story of the wise woman and the beheading of the rebel Sheba ben Bichri (2 Samuel 20:14–22) and in the account of the town's conquest by the Aramean king, Ben Hadad of Damascus (1 Kings 15:20).

The Arameans and Israelites seem to have had a "love-hate" relationship, judging from the ambiguous references that run the gamut from kinship (e.g., Jacob's marriage to Laban's daughters in Genesis 29) to coalitions in warfare (e.g., Aramean mercenaries join Asa king of Judah against Baasha king of Israel in 1 Kings 15:20, and Ben Hadad II battles King Ahab in 1 Kings 20). To this we might add the Tel Dan stela, which tells of ongoing skirmishes between these neighbors.

The truth is that the name "Aramean" is hard to define and should probably be understood as a mix of Aramean, Luwian (Neo-Hittite), Assyrian and some Phoenician elements that coalesced during the tenth to eighth centuries B.C.E.

"Aramean-ness" found expression in the language, artistic renditions and cultic practices—sometimes vying against and sometimes joining with the Israelites in the geopolitical maneuvering of the time. While none of this precludes the possibility that Abel Beth Maacah was incorporated into the Israelite kingdom sometime during David's reign as the Biblical text seems to imply, one must still ask, how would such an Aramean population, now Israelite citizens, have viewed themselves?

In light of this complexity, and given the lack of comparative archaeological data, should we even be looking for Arameans at Abel Beth Maacah? Will excavations on the upper mound provide the answers? Will we now have to reformulate our questions as we continue our search for Arameans at Abel Beth Maacah?

While great expectations might lead to great disappointments, in our case we are gaining an expanded and refined understanding of this admittedly complex picture. The nature of Abel Beth Maacah as a border site in a frontier zone that inevitably would be in flux between competing polities and tribes is key to understanding the nature of its role in Aramean-Israelite interaction during the first part of the first millennium B.C.E. A simple one-on-one correlation of material culture with this or that ethnic or national group, even if possible in the archaeological record, would be far less interesting than the fascinating present state of affairs at the Abel Beth Maacah excavation.

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