

## THE AMARNA LETTERS, THE HITTITES, AND THE CITY OF MEGIDDO

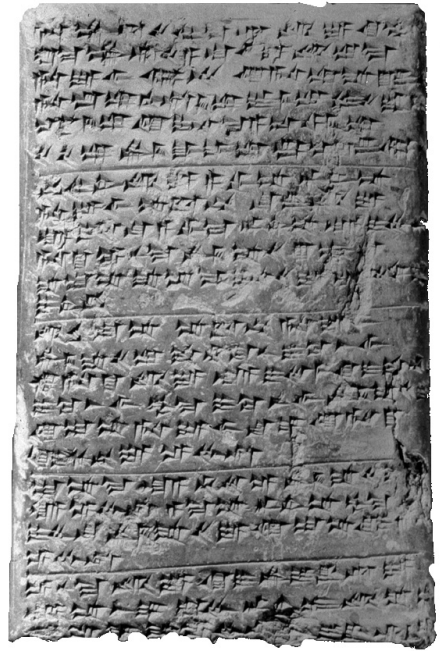
### The Amarna Letters

Several of the Amarna Letters were discovered in 1887 by a peasant woman sifting through the ancient Egyptian ruins at the palace of Akhenaten. Four years later, in 1891, the Egyptologist Sir William Flinders Petrie excavated Tell el-Amarna for two years and recovered the remaining tablets.

### *Background and Setting*

Tell el-Amarna (the “hill of Amarna”), a plain located on the east bank of the Nile River between Cairo or Memphis and Luxor in central Egypt, was the site where the ancient Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BC) and his reformer son Akhenaten (meaning “the splendor of Aten”) with his wife Nefertiti made their new capital, Khut-Aten. Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) is remembered for his abandonment of the old religious practice of Egypt (the worship of Amun, as facilitated by the priests located at Thebes). He instituted a new religious practice (some have referred to it as the first Egyptian attempt at monotheism) that exclusively worshipped the visible sun disk, Aten.

The 382 Amarna Letters consist of clay tablets written on both sides in Akkadian



Amarna Tablet (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

cuneiform (from *cuneus*, which means “wedge” and refers to the shape of the characters), the international political language of that day. The letters measure from as small as 2 by 2.5 inches to as large as 3.5 by 9.5 inches. The tablet pictured here is a letter from the king of Cyprus (Alashiya) to Amenhotep III, Akhenaten’s predecessor. It seems to be a response to Egypt regarding some Cypriot raiding of Egyptian villages.

The letters found at Amarna describe the political conditions and turmoil present in the Egyptian-controlled Canaanite (Syro-Israelite) territories during the time Israel was settling the Promised Land under Joshua (c. 1400 to 1300 BC). Some of the letters contain myths or legends, news about various cities, diplomatic correspondence, requests for supplies (food), and communication about the exchanging of gifts between kings. However, most are correspondence from the princes and vassal kings of Syria, Israel, Babylonia, Hatti (Hittites in Asia Minor), and Assyria to the Egyptian government, usually containing desperate pleas for economic and military help to combat invading armies and marauders threatening these kingdoms.

Although Moses subdued the land to the east of the Jordan River, the territories west of the Jordan were disintegrating into a state of chaos and desperation. Egypt was too weak to support and control its northeastern territories due to its own internal political and religious problems. It appears that the Israelites seized this opportunity under Joshua to establish themselves in Canaan, defeating one city after another. One particular correspondence on tablet 287 records that ‘Abdi-Heba, prince of Jerusalem (Urusalima), sent desperate news to Egypt that many officials in Jerusalem had joined the ‘*Apiru* and the lands of the King of Egypt were lost to his enemies. The prince’s plea for archers, protection, and even protective sanctuary in Egypt for his family appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

Scholars have agreed that ‘*Apiru* (also *Hapiru* or *Habiru*) is etymologically equatable to *Hebrew*.<sup>1</sup> This has led some to believe that the ‘*Apiru* references in the letters are to the Hebrews under Joshua’s command. However, further research has indicated that this term may not have been referring to an ethnic group; rather, it may be a derogatory word applied to all kinds of enemies (or outlaws) who harassed these territories. It seems the Canaanites used the term as a disdainful descriptive, and that the Babylonians employed the term to refer to some within their own military. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the word was also used before and after the conquest of Canaan. Nevertheless, it may be possible that since the Hebrews were known as Egyptian slaves, as “outlaws and marauders,” and were comprised of loosely connected nomadic individuals in their wanderings out of Canaan and into Egypt, with no ties to a settled community (that is, they were immigrants), this derogatory byword’s origin may have been connected to an ethnic stereotype of dislike (for example, Joshua or Abraham “the Jew/Hebrew,” meaning the “traveler” or “migrant”) long before the conquest.

### ***The Biblical Significance of the Amarna Letters***

The Amarna Letters have contributed to the historical reliability of the Old Testament in general, and they support the trustworthy nature of the descriptions found in

the Bible relating to the time of the conquest (1400 BC to 1300 BC) under Joshua in particular. This is evident for several reasons.

First, the presence of geographical markers is numerous. The collection of letters contains references to cities mentioned in the Bible, most of them being located along the Syrian and Canaanite coastal region. These include Ashkelon (Asqaluna), Gaza (Haz-zatu), Gezer (Gazru), Hazor (Hasura), Joppa (Yapu), Lachish (Lakisa), and Megiddo (Magidda), among others.

Second, the tablets reveal a settled Canaan territory as the book of Joshua describes. Critics of the Bible previously believed that Canaan was not settled earlier during the patriarchal period, and therefore, Joshua could not have conquered fortified cities like Jericho and Ai centuries later. However, the Amarna Letters ended this debate with their descriptions of villages, towns, camps, cities, provinces, and fortifications, as well as thriving agricultural production.

Third, many of the people groups described in the Bible have been identified in the letters. These include the Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, to name a few.

Fourth, the Amarna correspondence offers clarification of biblical passages. For example, tablet 287 records the words of the prince of Jerusalem (Urusalima), 'Abdi-Heba, when he writes to Egypt: "It was not my father and not my mother but the arm of the mighty king that placed me in the house of my father." This statement seems to offer illumination as to how the office of king-priest in Jerusalem was obtained by the mysterious king of Salem (Jerusalem), Melchizedek (Genesis 14:14-20). The phrase "not by father and not by mother" is reminiscent of Melchizedek's description by the author of the book of Hebrews when he writes of him, "He is without father or mother or genealogy" (Hebrews 7:3 ESV). This indicates that the occupant did not inherit the office (king-priest) by means of lineage, but only by appointment. This also offers us information on how to understand Jesus' relationship to Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:1-28. That is to say, Jesus was *appointed* a priest after the order of Melchizedek (7:15-17); His office was not inherited by lineage as was the Levitical priestly order.

Fifth, the Amarna Letters confirm that the language of Canaan in Abraham's day is the ancestor of the peasant speech of Israel today. This is obvious in various Canaanite words, names, and phrases (forms of speech) that persist in modern-day Israel and surrounding territories. This phenomenon confirms the prophet Isaiah's reference to the "language of Canaan" (Isaiah 19:18).

The historical value of the Amarna letters cannot be underestimated. Though as yet no undisputed direct reference to biblical figures or events have been discovered in the texts, they are rich indirect witnesses to the linguistic, historical, and political climate of those countries and cities mentioned in the Bible during the time of Joshua's conquest.

## The Hittites

For decades, the Hittite civilization remained an enigma to many, prompting nineteenth-century critical scholars to refer to them as a legendary people. This

conclusion grew from the fact that though the Bible mentions the Hittites nearly 50 times, there were no extrabiblical sources confirming them. For those who believe in the historical reliability of the Old Testament and the benefits of archaeological research in the ancient Near East, this posed a challenge.

However, this dilemma was quickly solved by discoveries made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1834, French archaeologist Charles Texier began researching an area about 100 miles east of Ankara, Turkey, near the modern city of Bogazkale, where he noticed the remains of large stone structures. Though these remains were not fully understood, progress was made when A.H. Sayce (in 1876) investigated an unknown language written on stones in Turkey and northern Syria, and when Ernest Chantre (in 1893 and 1894) located several fragments of undecipherable clay cuneiform tablets. These preliminary investigations came to a climax when, in 1906, Hugo Winckler began seven years of excavation that turned the Hittite debate upside down with his discovery of more than ten thousand clay tablets of the royal Hittite library! This discovery was pivotal in establishing the historical presence of the Hittite people and the historical reliability of the Old Testament narratives.



Hittite tablets. (Photo by Rex Geissler.)

### ***Background and Setting***

Throughout the Old Testament the Hittites are named in well-known events, including the reference to Bathsheba's husband as Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11) and that Abraham bought a cave from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23). Though much is still unknown, it now appears that sometime in the early second millennium BC the Hittites migrated from Europe to Anatolia (the peninsula of Asia Minor). They spoke an Anatolian form of Indo-European language.

The first Anatolian Hittite kingdom (which some call the Old Kingdom) seems to have begun in the seventeenth century BC at their capital city, known as Hattusha (also called Hattusas), under their first king, Labarnas I. The population was mostly comprised of a mixture of people groups indigenous to Europe, Hatti, and northern Syria. A series of tough battles with the Mittani (a rising power located east of the Euphrates) resulted in the Hittites losing control of northern Syria and much of their empire; subsequently the Old Kingdom was brought to an end in about 1400 BC.



Hittite soldiers carved on rock relief at the Hittite capital city of Hattusha. (Photo: Rex Geissler.)

The New Kingdom started where the Old Kingdom ended, locked in war with the Egyptians and Mittani over the valued region of northern Syria. Ultimately, the Hittite king Suppiluliuma I succeeded in bringing the Hittites the long-desired control of Syria, which expanded the kingdom from the Euphrates River in the east, to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, to Hattusha and Anatolia in the north. In the ensuing years, the Hittites saw more war, and a series of peace treaties were signed with surrounding nations, including Egypt, in order to keep the growing Assyrian army to the east in check. However, the placating and political positioning was short-lived; in the twelfth century BC Hattusha was destroyed by invading tribes from the west, leaving the surviving remnant of the people, known as the “Neo-Hittites,” to live in the southeastern region of the former kingdom. By the ninth and eighth century BC, the Assyrian army pushed west toward Syria, and soon after, Tiglath-pileser III put an end to the remaining Hittite influence in the region.



The arched Lion Gate at Hattusha is one of five Hittite gates attached to the city walls. (Photo by Rex Geissler.)

The archaeological discoveries at Hattusha and other Anatolian locations of Hittite influence reveal their unique and elusive language was an adaptation of indigenous languages such as Akkadian, Hattic, and Sumerian, using the cuneiform script. In addition, Hittite inscriptions have revealed that the Hittites were accustomed to using a unique form of hieroglyphics like the one shown in this hieroglyphic Hittite seal, which dates from the period of 1400 to 1200 BC.

Most of the tablets discovered, however, were written in the cuneiform script, which has allowed scholars to reconstruct the origin, development, and law codes of the Hittite people.

There is no doubt that the Hittites have a prominent role in the Old Testament, appearing among Solomon’s wives (1 Kings 11:1) and horse trading partners (1 Kings 10:29). Esau’s wives (Judith and Basemath) were Hittites (Genesis 26:34); however, a problematic passage emerges as Abraham (2000–1850 BC), who lived prior to the establishment of the Hittite kingdom (1650 BC), is said to have purchased the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite. Harry Hoffner Jr. has offered a solution to this apparent historical anachronism by recognizing that the words *Hittite* and *Hethite* are written identically in consonantal Hebrew. Therefore, the Genesis 23 passage should be understood as referring not to the Hittites of



Hittite seal ring. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

Anatolia and northern Syria, but the Hethites indigenous to Hebron (see the NET translation of this passage, which has adopted “Hethites”). What is more, it appears that references to “Hittites” throughout the Scriptures can have many usages, as they can mean Canaanites (Genesis 15:20), Hurrians, or Horites.

### *The Biblical Significance of Discoveries About the Hittites*

No longer can one accept the critical belief that the Hittites are a mythical people conjured up in the fertile imagination of the Old Testament writers. Though much more could be learned about Hittite law, language, and culture, the discoveries at Hattusha and other areas of Hittite influence have silenced the most ardent Bible skeptics. The once insurmountable dilemma involving the Hittites has now been turned into a victory for archaeology as a discipline and for Bible-believing Christians.

### **Ancient Megiddo**

Megiddo is a strategically located ancient city in the Jezreel Valley (also known as the Plain of Esdraelon) with a long embattled history and a future, according to prophecy, as the place known as *Armageddon* (literally, “mountain of Megiddo”—Revelation 16:12-16; 19:19). Its proximity to the international trade highway that connected ancient merchants from Mesopotamia to Egypt made Megiddo the ideal setting for prosperity and power.

The city was first examined in 1903 to 1905 by the German explorer Gottlieb Schumacher, of the Society for Oriental Research (on behalf of the Deutscher Palästina-Verein). There he discovered various Egyptian and Hebrew artifacts as well as some 20 layers of occupation dating back to the Chalcolithic period. Subsequent excavations by the University of Chicago (1925 to 1939), Yigael Yadin (1960 to 1971), and David Ussishkin and Israel Finkelstein (1992 to 2002), have unearthed several more layers of occupation, bringing the total number of strata to 25.

### *Background and Setting*

Megiddo is mentioned in the Bible and attested in extrabiblical sources, the earliest of which recounts the military exploits of Thutmose III (1468 BC) in his attempt to subdue the Canaanite-



Tel Megiddo. (Photo by Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com.)

occupied Megiddo. During the time of Joshua, it was a city far away from Egypt’s control and easily conquered by the Hebrews in their invasion of Canaan (Joshua 12:21). It also comprised part of the territory given to Manasseh (Joshua 17:11), though it remained occupied by its former inhabitants (Judges 1:27). By the tenth century BC, the city had become one of Solomon’s administrative capitals along with other major cities such as Hazor and Gezer (1 Kings 4:7-12). Extrabiblical sources such as the Amarna Tablets (fourteenth century BC) describe Megiddo as the center of conflict. The tablets record

that the prince of Megiddo wrote to Egypt in order to request military aid to overcome an attack from the king of Shechem wishing to expand his territory. In addition, Tiglath-pileser III (Assyria) mentions that his armies captured Megiddo in 732 BC. The valley of Megiddo has been the site of many battles both ancient and modern. In ancient times, Ahaziah and Josiah, kings of Judah, were killed there (2 Kings 9:27; 23:29-30). In the modern era, General Allenby defeated the Turks in the same area during World War I.



Megiddo stone altar—Early Bronze Age (3200–2200 BC).

Apparently, Megiddo's settlement activity commenced sometime in the period from 4000 BC to 3000 BC, though the presence of flint implements suggests even earlier Neolithic activity at the site. Megiddo's growth by the third millennium BC became apparent when archaeologists uncovered massive fortifications in some places measuring 25 feet across and nearly 18 feet high. Moreover, an elaborate religious or sacred precinct that featured a circular shaped stone

Canaanite altar and several temples was discovered. The sacred area was most likely enclosed by a low wall. The presence of animal bones in the surrounding area and cult paraphernalia reveal that the high place was used for sacrificing animals.

In the Middle Bronze Age, Megiddo was expanded to include an increased number of dwellings, and the city once again appeared to prosper under Egyptian control, though Egypt's influence may have been limited, as reflected in the Amarna Tablets. Soon after, Megiddo experienced a period of decline that began in the Late Bronze Age and continued until the time Joshua conquered the city. From the time of its conquest until Solomon acquired the city as one of his provincial administrative sites in the tenth century BC, it was destroyed several times. During this period, the infrastructure was poorly kept and construction was below par.

The biblical and extrabiblical description of the city and its activities appears to be consistent with the testimony of Scripture. Namely, 1) it was an early urban center, 2) it was destroyed during the time of Joshua's conquest of the city, 3) it reflects people groups mentioned in the Bible (for example, Canaanites, Hebrews, and so on), 4) the presence of gods, goddesses, altars, cult figurines, and offering stands reflect the practice of pagans and Israel alike, and 5) the architectural signature pattern of the fortifications reflects the work of Solomon.

### *Megiddo's Confirmation of the Biblical Record*

There are several features and artifacts related to Megiddo that confirm the reliability of the biblical record.

First, Solomon fortified Megiddo (1 Kings 9:15-17) by making improvements in the defensive walls, palace, and gate systems. Yigael Yadin, of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, first recognized Solomon's architectural signature by relating the similar gate systems

he found while excavating Hazor and revisiting the archaeological records at Gezer, which contained the same trademark gate design. According to 1 Kings 9:15, Solomon was the fortifier of these three cities.\* Archaeologists have shown that these gates are nearly identical in their dimension, architecture, and materials used, thus reflecting a single individual behind their construction. This detail is indirect confirmation of the biblical record of Solomon's activity at these locations and his historical presence. Most likely, by the end of the tenth century BC Megiddo was destroyed by Egypt's Pharaoh Shishak, as it was then under the control of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Second, during Gottlieb Schumacher's expedition to Megiddo in the early twentieth century, he recovered a seal belonging to the servant of Israel's king Jeroboam II (793–753 BC). It reads, "Belonging to Shema, servant of Jeroboam." Second Kings 14:23-29 offers us details concerning Jeroboam: He reigned 41 years from Samaria, had a son named Zechariah, who eventually became king, and was an idolater who did evil in the eyes of the Lord. The seal was eventually lost, but fortunately, impressions were made like the one pictured here.

Third, archaeologists have discovered that Megiddo's water-tunnel system was most likely carved out around the ninth to eighth century BC, at least in part (the shaft) by Israel's King Ahab. The shaft descends some 120 feet and is connected to a freshwater spring by over 200 feet of tunnel (pictured below) that was carved by two work parties, one at each end, similar to Hezekiah's tunnel construction in Jerusalem. The tunnel system was necessary due to the frequent sieges levied against the inhabitants of Megiddo and the location of the spring. Because it lay outside the fortification walls, Megiddo's water supply was vulnerable to enemy attack or discovery. Previous to the tunnel's construction, residents would have to leave the safety of the city defensive walls to retrieve water. However, the tunnel allowed for easy access from within the city confines as long as the spring itself was concealed from enemy sight.

Fourth, in the 1950s a portion of a Mesopotamian flood narrative, known as the *Epic*



Solomon's casemate gate complex at Megiddo.

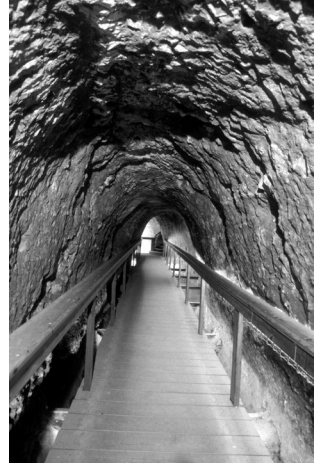


The Shema seal mentioning Jeroboam II. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

\* In 1969, excavators at Gezer discovered an ash layer in which Hebrew, Egyptian, and Philistine artifacts were found, suggesting all the three cultures had converged at the site at the same time. For some time archaeologists were unsure of how to make sense of the finds, then 1 Kings 9:16 helped them understand exactly what they had come across. The text says that the pharaoh of Egypt captured and destroyed Gezer with fire, killing the Canaanites who dwelt there. Subsequently, Pharaoh gave Gezer as a dowry to one of Solomon's wives, who happened to be Pharaoh's daughter!

of *Gilgamesh*, was discovered at the site. As mentioned in chapter 16, the widespread presence (in nearly two dozen civilizations) of the Flood story, despite the traditional stories' legendary tone, leaves little doubt that the account of Noah's Flood recorded in Genesis 6–9 describes actual historical events. The various flood accounts emerging from different areas of the world, such as China, Greece, Israel, Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and the New World, among others, are consistent with what scholars would expect if the key elements of the story were true.

For example, the crucial elements of the story are present in the various accounts, which imply or directly state that 1) the gods were alienated from man, 2) the gods became angry and plan to send a flood, 3) a Noah-like figure is warned of the flood and builds a boat, 4) various kinds of animals and his family are brought aboard, 5) the catastrophic deluge occurs, 6) the boat comes to rest upon a mountain as the waters subside, and 7) the Noah-like figure and his family disembark from the boat safely. After recognizing the key elements in the stories, it is tempting to claim that the later Genesis account borrowed from or is literarily dependent in some way on the earlier mythical accounts of the Flood. However, again as previously mentioned, after comparing both traditions, many Near Eastern scholars have recognized that the similarities between the Mesopotamian and Hebrew accounts of the Flood cannot be easily explained by literary dependence. This is because there are significant key differences within both traditions that are contradictory, as well as problems relating to the progression of myth over time.\*



Megiddo water tunnel. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

### *The Biblical Significance of Megiddo*

Megiddo eventually came under the control of the Assyrians in the late eighth century BC as an administrative center and was later destroyed by Pharaoh Necho in 609 BC. The city continued to exist through the reigns of biblical kings Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes I during the Persian period, only to be abandoned during the Hellenistic period in the mid fourth century BC.

It is not difficult to recognize and appreciate the value of Megiddo in confirming the historical reliability of the Bible. First, the location itself has been discovered to be the biblical city of Megiddo that is mentioned in six books of the Bible. Second, Solomon has been confirmed as the architect of the Iron Age II gate systems that feature a unique casemate pattern (which features a series of chambers between the walls) identical to

\* For the details of the similarities and difference in both accounts as well as why we reject literary dependence, see the section in chapter 16 on the *Gilgamesh* epic and *Enuma Elish*.

Hazor and Gezer. Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin has also recognized that a palace in the city was built during the reign of Solomon, as well as several fortifications. Third, the biblical king of Israel Jeroboam II has been confirmed as a historical figure due to the discovery of his servant Shema's seal by Gottlieb Schumacher. Fourth, the water shaft at Megiddo has been credited by many to Israel's King Ahab. Fifth, the Babylonian account of the flood recovered at the site, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, supports the Genesis account of a catastrophic flood. In addition to these, the cumulative data unearthed at Megiddo support the biblical account of the peoples and events surrounding the region, including the involvement of the Canaanites, Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hebrews, confirming the city of Megiddo as a valued piece of evidence confirming the biblical record.