

Dr. Jeffrey Hudon, Biblical Archaeology, Session 20, Archaeology of the Great Eighth Century

© 2024 Jeffrey Hudon and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Jeffrey Hudon and his teaching on Biblical Archaeology. This is session 20, Archaeology of the Great Eighth Century.

Okay, we've covered most of the Iron Age, but I want to now focus on a very influential and important century of the Iron Age.

We kind of went through it briefly, but we're going to look at it in depth in this video lecture. It is the 8th century B.C., and this is called by archaeologists the Iron Age 2B, and that's roughly the dates there, those are, the first date is my date, but that I, but most scholars will say around 800 to 701. I make it 792 because that's the change from Amaziah to Uzziah as a result of the defeat at Beit Shemesh and Amaziah being taken as a prisoner of war to Samaria. Many people call it the Great Eighth Century, and foremost among those was the late scholar Philip King, who gave the SBL President's Address way back in the 1980s and published that in JBL, the eighth, the greatest of centuries, and there's an argument definitely that that could be correct.

What's going on in the 8th century? It's a very tumultuous century, and it begins with the resurgence of both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, Israel, and Judah, and from about 790 to 740, both kingdoms became very, very strong and flexed their muscles and expanded both politically, their political borders, and their economic strength. This is really, in some ways, a second golden age, following the United Monarchy of Israelite and Judahite culture and society, and these are critiqued, noted, and critiqued in some of the prophets, notably Hosea, Amos, and the important passage in Isaiah 5. Now, after 740, everything changes. The Assyrians begin to flex their muscles and rumblings to the east in Mesopotamia as Tiglath-Pileser III begins to advance and ultimately conquers Galilee and makes the Northern Kingdom almost a small rump state after his advance into the Levant.

The century ends with Sennacherib's invasion and the devastation throughout the Kingdom of Judah and the small regional kingdoms again, submitting as vassals to this Assyrian king with great loss of life and just tremendous destruction and then deportation of so many people. So, it's a very, very eventful century, but also for biblical history, a very important century because of the prophetic voices that we hear and the political events, both good and bad, that occurred. First of all, I want to look at the geopolitical context of this century.

First, we look at Egypt. Again, Egypt is still in this third intermediate period, so it's fragmented and under weak control between the 23rd and 25th dynasties.

K.A. Kitchen, a noted Egyptologist and an expert on the third intermediate period notes this in his famous work by the same title. Egypt simply did not play a major role in international affairs until the 26th or Saite dynasty in the late 7th century BC. So, you see, because of the weakness of Egypt during this time, that allowed these regional kingdoms for a short, brief window to become strong and to exert their own influence.

And that is exactly what Israel and Judah did. The other great power, which is the Mesopotamian power of Assyria, also began this century quite weak. Again, regional conflicts and weak leadership during the first half of the century confined Assyria to northern Mesopotamia and, in some cases, to the confines of Nineveh itself.

And it was only during the reign, as we've seen before, of Tiglath-Pileser III, who came to the throne in the third quarter of the 8th century, that Assyria reasserted itself as a world global empire. Now, the experts here are D.J. Wiseman and Haim Tadmor. Wiseman is pictured here.

Haim Tadmor's important work on the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III and some of the other works listed here, including Grayson's. We have a lot of Assyrian records. The records of Tiglath-Pileser were muddled and confused and fragmentary, but Tadmor and his disciples have collected those together brilliantly.

Here's a list of 8th-century Assyrian kings, some of whom we know very little about until Tiglath-Pileser. And then these are definitely on the radar, biblically speaking, because of what they did in the land of Israel. Tiglath-Pileser again conquered most of Galilee, northern Israel.

Shalmaneser III in Sargon completed the destruction of the northern kingdom. And then Sennacherib devastated the southern kingdom, although Jerusalem was spared. And you can see their dates as well.

This is a picture of Assyria at its height. It's actually later than the 7th century, when Upper and Lower Egypt were also under Assyrian control. So, at their height, the Assyrians were very, very powerful, including conquering much of Urartu and Asia Minor.

In the biblical context of the 8th century, we see the prophets and the historical works, kings, and chronicles. Of course, Jonah, again, is an early 8th-century context for the book of Jonah, where he goes and preaches to Nineveh. Amos, again, a Judahite who goes and preaches, gives oracles against Israel and the other nations at Bethel.

Hosea, a northern prophet whom God tells to marry a prostitute to live, is an example of how Israel has treated God. And then, of course, the great prophet Isaiah,

possibly a member of the Davidic family, a court prophet in the Jerusalem palace, and a brilliant writer. The first half of his prophecy, again, reflects the circumstances of the late 8th century.

And then, finally, Micah, a prophet of the people in western Judah, in the Shephelah, again, make up the last of these prophets, which give a lot of insight into what's going on in the kingdom, or these kingdoms, I should say, during this very interesting century. Joel and Obadiah, those dates are uncertain, and probably later, so not included here in this list. Now, the 8th century begins on a kind of a very bad note.

Amaziah is campaigning in Edom, the king of Judah, and has Israelite mercenaries with him. He dismisses those mercenaries who are angry for not being paid and not being followed through with their contract, and so they ravish some of the towns of Judah. Amaziah and Jehoash of Israel exchange words, which are recorded, unpleasantries, I should say, and the two armies of Israel and Judah face off at Beit Shemesh, in the Shephelah, in the Zorich Valley, and Judah is defeated.

More than that, Judah is ravaged by the army of Jehoash, Jerusalem itself is sacked, and the walls of Jerusalem are knocked down, and the term here is kind of broken down or pushed down by the Israelite army. So, this is bad, obviously, for Judah. Amaziah is taken as a hostage and taken back to Samaria, so his son, with advisors, of course, Uzziah, takes over the kingship of Judah.

Interestingly enough, the Beit Shemesh that arises out of this battle is unfortified, and that, I think, speaks pointedly to the fact that later on in the century, Judah expanded, and this was no longer a border city as it had been for a number of years, a long length of time. More than that, when Uzziah takes over, and Amaziah is removed from the kingship because he's a hostage, this is an interesting coincidence because you have a destruction layer at the site, and you've got a change in kings the same instant, the same exact event. So, you can correlate a destruction layer with a session of a new king, and, with Edwin Thiele's help, who wrote the Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings, we can point to a very precise date for the beginning of the Iron 2B, which I put at 792, which is when this event took place.

And this is what we talked about, what I just mentioned. This is an overview of Beit Shemesh with the modern excavations done by Tel Aviv University, and the fact that these two events correlate, a change of king and a destruction layer, make an ideal bookmark or line to change from Iron 2A to Iron 2B. I want to spend some time talking about a very well-known site in the archaeological and biblical literature, and that site is Kuntillet Ajrud.

We mentioned it earlier. Kuntillet Ajrud is a very isolated site in eastern Sinai. You can see the map here with it, and it's just over on the Egyptian side of the Sinai border with Israel.

But again, during the 1970s, Israel had control over Sinai, and so they sent various expeditions out to do surveys to look at the archaeological remains of this very barren region. And one of those researchers was Ze'ev Meshel, and he did excavations at a very isolated fort. You could call it a fort.

That's even contested and debated. They found out through these excavations in the mid-70s that this isolated fort-walled structure was only occupied for a very short period of time, the late 9th and early 8th century BC. More than that, the pottery assemblage from this fort had a mixture of northern Israelite forms and Judahite forms, as well as other forms from the coast and perhaps even from Egypt, if I remember right.

There was superb preservation of small finds and the remains here, and it was very important. What was found was very, very important to understanding the history of these two kingdoms. Now, 95% to 99% of the focus on this site are inscriptions written on storage jars or pithoi that were found in the inner gate chamber.

But these will really, in my opinion, are secondary in importance. Now, these inscriptions were epitaphs or prayers, and they included the terms Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah. And, of course, we saw those before at Khirbet el-Qom, and this seems to indicate a syncretistic view of God, a mixture of Canaanite and Yahwehistic faith.

And again, the script here and the orthography seem to be northern. So, what you've got here is a northern Israelite garrison serving apparently with a Judahite garrison on the border of Egypt, and it will impact us more when we specifically talk about Uzziah, the reign of Uzziah. But the sensational literature about God and his wife, God and his Canaanite wife, is really secondary in nature, in my opinion, to the fact of the geopolitical implications of this site that seems to be jointly garrisoned by Judahites and Israelites on the Egyptian border.

We'll talk more about that later. The reign of Jeroboam of Israel was very prosperous. Again, he was part of the Jehu dynasty, and he was able to expand the borders of the northern kingdom, including parts of Transjordan, up into Syria, up into the Aramean, Damascus area.

But the Bible is very, very, the Book of Kings is very, very brief on their description of his reign. And you've got terms like Lebo Hamat, which might mean the entrance to Hamat or an actual site. But they were clearly prosperous years under his long reign.

This, again, of course, is a model of Megiddo that depicts Megiddo during the early 8th century. We already talked about the Seal of Shema, servant of Jeroboam, most definitely Jeroboam II, and the Ivories of Samaria. These all date to his reign.

So, it was a very important reign, but at the same time, very little was known about it. Now, we'll have a special PowerPoint lecture on Uzziah, but he was also very, very successful during this time. The king of Judah, who took over when Amaziah was taken hostage, and had a long 52-year reign with much success.

Then things started falling apart, and the first king to reign after Uzziah was his son Yotam. He had seemingly a reign that continued the success of his father, but he was followed by Ahaz, who was a weak king. And it was during his reign that the Philistines began to invade Judah from the west.

The old nemesis way back from the United Monarchy and before now began to rear their ugly head and took over part of the western Shephelah. More than that, Ahaz was very close to the Assyrians and became a vassal of Tiglath-Pileser and wanted Assyrian help against pressure from other regional kingdoms to resist Assyria. And that started a war called the Syro-Ephraimite War, which is mentioned in Isaiah 7. And so instead of when Isaiah says, trust in the Lord and don't trust in the Assyrians or anybody else, Ahaz weakens and goes to Assyria for help.

Now, there's a later text in 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38, where there's a term called the Dial of Ahaz. This is a term that is used during Hezekiah's reign and is believed by Yadin and others to represent some sort of a, what would you call it? A sundial that was two flights of stairs joining at the top. This is kind of an artist's reconstruction of what it may have looked like to tell time.

Perhaps Ahaz found this or discovered this when he visited Damascus and saw the beautiful Assyrian altar that he wanted to copy in Jerusalem. He may have seen this as well and so built this, some large sundial, I guess you could call it, for his palace. Of course, that was mentioned later in a later context during the reign of Hezekiah.

We have actually, again, a bullae or a seal impression with the name of Ahaz on it. And again, here's a picture of late Philistine wear or Ashdod wear from that time that the Philistines were using when they invaded Judah. The fall of Israel took place in the 8th century, and you've got the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, finally destroying this great city of Samaria, which was probably in some ways larger and more impressive than Jerusalem itself.

And again, all of the population is deported after this long war. Siege and the northern kingdom are no more. And Tiglath or Tiglath-Pileser's successors, these two kings, Shalmaneser and Sargon, imported peoples from the northern provinces of Assyria into the land to replace the people they deported.

And hence we have the beginning of the Samaritans, these so-called half-breeds of people that inhabit northern Israel after the fall of Samaria. Now, during the 8th

century, Jerusalem also experienced exponential growth. As we've seen before, the city of David, up through the reign of David, was the core of Jerusalem.

This was the city of Jerusalem, a hot dog-shaped eastern hill that was fortified and built upon. Solomon extended that, including the Ophel and the Temple Mount, Mount Moriah. But in the 8th century, and I believe early in the 8th century, perhaps even in the late 9th century, you've got extramural suburbs here on the western hill.

There is much better real estate, by the way, here than here. But they finally fortified it with a wall. And the wall that Jehoash destroyed in Jerusalem is difficult to describe. They describe the length and the number of towers.

It has to have been a wall that encompassed the western hill. So, it might have been a wall that was under construction or a wall that had recently been erected. And Jehoash, again, burst through that and took it down.

So Uzziah and his successors had to rebuild that wall. That encompassed a huge new area and expanded Jerusalem immensely when it covered the western hill and the hill which is now the Armenian quarter of the old city. So, you see again the progression here of these small graphs of a small city, David, Solomon, Solomonic extension, and then the later monarchy that enclosed the western hill.

But then in the Persian period, after the fall, when the fall of the kingdom in 586, when the deportees came back, they rebuilt Jerusalem, but only this area of Jerusalem. And we'll talk about that when we talk about Nehemiah chapter 3. The reign of Hezekiah, one of the most famous kings of Judah, was again eventful. And Hezekiah was a vassal, a minimal vassal of Assyria, but at the same time was building up this military, building up his supplies, fortifying his cities, and we believe excavating a water channel now called Hezekiah's Tunnel, and now also debated whether Hezekiah actually built this.

It could have been done earlier. He certainly did part of it, according to 2 Chronicles 32. But he brought water from the Gihon Spring outside of the city into the city, into the Siloam Pool, so the people of the western hill and the city of David could get water without going outside the wall.

And that was a tremendous engineering feat because it was a serpentine-shaped tunnel that, again, engineers still are trying to figure out exactly how they did it. They could have been following a crack in the rock that was leaking water or something else, but they were able to follow the water. Two different groups of workmen working from opposite ends somehow met in the middle.

An important inscription relating to this was a Siloam Inscription found in the 1880s actually by Arab children playing in the water there, and that was cut out of the rock

and sent to Istanbul, where it remains today. But it's an unfinished inscription. It's the longest monumental inscription in Judah, but it's unfinished, and it describes, again, the workmen coming from opposite ends and meeting and hearing each other's voices and noise through the rock and meeting, and the tunnels are joined, and water flows from the Gihon to the Siloam Pool.

Now, there are also sluice gates and the Siloam Channel along the eastern side of the city of David, which watered gardens, and this may date back to Solomon watering his royal gardens in the Kidron Valley. So, the chronicler in particular notes that Hezekiah fortified Jerusalem, the cities of Judah, amassed large amounts of supplies in preparation for a revolt that he was planning against Assyria. He also entertained Merodach, Baladan, or emissaries from that Babylonian ruler to coordinate his revolt with other forces.

And, of course, this is the height of the use of the royal or lamelek jars of Judah, which we see another stamped handle there as well. Now, at a very, very important moment in 705, Sargon II dies in battle in Iran, and this is a very bad omen for Assyria when you have a king that dies in battle, and they apparently were not able to even recover the body. And so, again, Assyria being such a hated empire because of what it does, vassals around the empire saw it as a weakness, that this is a weakness, that Assyria was in decline, and so everybody revolted.

And Hezekiah formulated and got all the regional kingdoms around Judah to join in this revolt. All was not well, though, because Sennacherib amassed a huge army and began to put down this rebellion, and in 701, he appeared from the north, coming from the north towards the southern Levant, and it was at that time that Hezekiah's allies, the Transjordanian kingdoms, the Philistines, and the Phoenician kingdoms all ran up to Sennacherib and offered tribute and surrendered. So, Hezekiah was essentially left in revolt, and so Sennacherib came with his huge army and systematically conquered and destroyed the cities of Judah, again culminating with Lachish, which we had talked about earlier.

Then he came to Jerusalem and surrounded the city, waiting for the final prize to take the capital city of Judah, the great city of Jerusalem. And of course, we know that the biblical account tells us that the angel of the Lord again destroyed the entire army. Sennacherib went home without an army and was eventually murdered by his own sons.

Now, again, as we mentioned before, there is a huge amount of evidence and layers of destruction throughout the kingdom of Judah that are attributed to this campaign of Sennacherib. It's a very strong red-letter date in the archaeology of the Bible. Now what we see here is a recently discovered seal with the name Hezekiah, king of Judah, Melech Yehudah, here on the bottom.

And so that's a personal seal. We have several copies of this. We talked about the Bethlehem seal impression, possibly dating from this time.

But what we haven't talked about yet is this tomb inscription that was discovered by Charles Claremont-Ganneau in Silwan, that Arab village just opposite the city of David across the Kidron Valley. That was, Silwan was the necropolis or one of Jerusalem's cemeteries in the Old Testament. And many of the houses there today have back rooms that are actually tomb chambers carved in the rock.

So Claremont-Ganneau was looking and studying all the tombs over there in the 1870s and 1880s and found this inscription. He recognized it as an inscription, but he couldn't read it. It was in such a weathered, battered shape.

You can see the damage here. This hole was cut, possibly for a roof beam, but he noted it and left it in situ. But later on, it was cut out and shipped to the British Museum. It was at the British Museum that a young Israeli scholar by the name of Nachman Avigad, in the 1950s, restudied this and was able to decipher the text.

And it says this is the tomb of Shebnayahu or Yahu. We don't have the first part of the name because of this hole here cut. Who is over the house? This is a term Hebrew tomb for royal steward.

There is nothing here but his body and the body of his slave wife. Cursed be the man who opens this tomb. And this tells us a lot.

First of all, the person who is a royal steward with the Yahwistic name Yahu or Yah at the end, has to be at the time of Hezekiah, Shebna, Shebnayahu. Isaiah, in chapter 22, even comments about this exact person and may have been standing in on the city of David and pointing to his tomb when he was commenting about the royal steward. This also tells us that the typical Judean could read; they were literate because it warned people to stay away from the tomb and not to open it.

It was a very, very important find, an incredible accomplishment by Avigad at that early stage of his career to actually decipher that and read that inscription. Sennacherib's invasion of Judah again is documented in these prisms, one of which we have here at the Horn Museum, a copy. Very important and of course, a lot of, with all the three biblical texts, Isaiah, Kings, and Chronicles all document this invasion as well as Sennacherib himself.

So, you've got two different versions, biblical version and an Assyrian version, but there's still tremendous amount of questions about exactly what happened and how things occurred. And we talked about an earlier slide presentation in the fall of Lachish. This is Lachish on the eve of Sennacherib's invasion.

And again, these Lachish reliefs show the Assyrian siege machinery, conquest, and the deportation of Lachish's residents. And Byron's poem again. And again, these points that I have here are kind of the ultimate fate of what happened during Sennacherib's invasion.

No destruction layer in Jerusalem, which again supports the miraculous event recorded in the Old Testament. The only destruction layer in Jerusalem is the Babylonian destruction of 586 by Nebuchadnezzar. Nothing earlier has been found.

185,000 Assyrians died outside the walls of Jerusalem. It's interesting that Herodotus, the much later Greek historian, gives a cryptic account of a plague that affected Assyrian troops in the region. That could be a memory of this event, a biblical event.

Sennacherib's inscriptions and reliefs strongly imply, if not admit, that Jerusalem was not conquered. The fact that Assyria would do such a step-by-step systematic destruction of a kingdom and leave the capital untouched tells us that some dramatic event had to have happened and just left. So, Judah and Hezekiah survive, but the kingdom is devastated and later becomes an Assyrian vassal state during the reign of Manasseh.

And, of course, the rise of the royal Zion theology is the final point, which is a false theology that God would never leave Jerusalem. Jerusalem cannot be conquered because God resides there. And that is unfortunately later found out to be false.

Thank you very much.

This is Dr. Jeffrey Hudson and his teaching on Biblical Archaeology. This is session 20, Archaeology of the Great Eighth Century.