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Top 10 Biblical Archaeology

Stories of 2024

1

GORDON GOVIER

From a Mediterranean shipwreck to a mosaic on display in Washington, DC, these are the discoveries that made scholars of the biblical world say “wow” this year.



Jacob Sharvit, left, and Karnit Bahartan examine ancient jars that were carried on the world's oldest known deep-sea ship.

Emil Aladjem/Israel Antiquities Authority via AP

The continued fighting in Israel limited biblical archaeology this year. But a few excavations made it into the field in 2024, and some of their discoveries are remarkable. Israel also sent some of its most treasured discoveries abroad—a boon for many in the US who would like to see them.

While the most important discoveries of this past year will not be known for years to come, these are the top stories about archaeological developments related to the land of the Bible, the biblical period, and the early history of Christianity that caught our attention in 2024.

10. A new center in Jerusalem

The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) opened its new center in Jerusalem after 14 years of construction. [The Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein National Campus for the Archaeology of Israel](#) hasn't had a grand opening yet—that may still be a year or two away. But the

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\$106 million structure just down the hill from the Israel Museum began inviting the public to see the new archaeological discoveries.

Architect and urban planner Moshe Safdie designed the building to resemble an excavation site. The entrance is covered by a canopy resembling those found at excavations all over Israel. As visitors descend, they see galleries, laboratories, films, and exhibits that display a small portion of the archaeological richness of the Holy Land.

2

9. The Siege of Jerusalem

The Assyrian king Sennacherib “came down” on Jerusalem in 701 BC “like the wolf on the fold,” with his armies “gleaming in purple and gold,” as [famously described](#) by the poet Byron. The king, for his part, ordered [an inscription](#) memorializing the feat, saying how he’d shut up Hezekiah “like a caged bird in his royal city.” Sennacherib conveniently omitted the fact that he failed to actually take Jerusalem.

The site of that siege has been [identified](#) by archaeologist Stephen Compton using modern mapping techniques.

Compton took a depiction of Sennacherib’s camp from detailed relief panels excavated from Sennacherib’s palace in Ninevah back in 1840, which are now on display at the British Museum. He superimposed that picture on aerial photos of a siege camp at Lachish, Judah’s second largest city, which was conquered in 701 BC.

Compton then looked around Jerusalem and found a similar layout at Ammunition Hill, now remembered as the site of fierce fighting in Israel’s 1967 Six-Day War. It’s a mile and a half north of Jerusalem’s Damascus Gate. Perhaps someday an excavation will search for siege evidence from 701 BC.

Although Jerusalem was not conquered by Sennacherib, [the Assyrians exacted heavy tribute](#). Archaeologists also reported the excavation of an administrative center, near the new US Embassy in southern Jerusalem, that may have been used by the Assyrians to collect tribute. Researchers believe it was built on top of an older administrative center, built by King Hezekiah or his father Ahaz and razed by the invaders to demonstrate their authority. Excavation uncovered an array of personalized, stamped handles from storage jars.

8. Skills of the ancient mariners

The IAA announced the discovery of [the deepest and earliest shipwreck](#) ever found in the Eastern Mediterranean. Previously, historians knew of only two Bronze Age shipwrecks in the region, both near the coast of Turkey. This discovery, 56 miles offshore,

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suggests ancient mariners were venturing far from shore, which would only be possible with well-developed celestial navigation skills.

“This is a world-class, history-changing discovery,” said Jacob Sharvit, head of the IAA’s marine unit. “This reveals the ancient mariners’ navigation skills—capable of traversing the Mediterranean Sea without a line of sight to any coast.”

A natural gas company was surveying the sea floor with a submersible robot and came upon a huge pile of jugs a mile below the surface. A few of the jugs were raised to the surface and identified as Late Bronze Age Canaanite storage vessels from the 14th–13th century BC. The Canaanites later became known as seafaring Phoenicians and developed a trading network that ranged across the Mediterranean Sea during the Iron Age.

7. A libation token

Clay seal impressions with images and letters on one flat side and perhaps the impression on the other [are common in biblical archaeology](#). It’s quite rare to find a blob of ancient clay that is pinched on one side with writing and an image on the reverse, but that’s what a team at the Temple Mount Sifting Project found.

The discovery, made in 2011, was [identified](#) in 2024 as a pilgrim’s token, which could be exchanged for an offering at the temple. The wine jar depicted on the token may indicate it was payment for wine to be poured out on the temple altar. The use of such tokens is described in the Mishna, the oral Jewish law compiled in the second century.

6. Canaanite complex conundrums

Some of the excavations that took place in 2024 explored Canaanite cult complexes dating to the Early Bronze Age, 1,000 years before Abraham, and to the Late Bronze Age, around the time of the Exodus.

Salvage archaeologists preparing the way for urban expansion excavated a site near Beit Shemesh this year and [found a building that had been used for ritual activity](#) before being suddenly abandoned. Tiny cultic vessels, which probably had a symbolic purpose, were still intact.

Few similar public buildings from the period have been found in Israel, and this site is helping archaeologists develop their understanding of early urbanization.

About six miles south, another Canaanite cult complex has been uncovered at Tel Azekah. Archaeologists say it began as an open-air sanctuary with a spectacular view and was later enclosed. It was dubbed “[the Temple of the Rising Sun](#).”

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Ten miles further south, the 14th season of excavation at Tel Burna ended after just three weeks because of the war, with some significant mysteries still unsolved. Archaeologists believe they discovered the part of the cultic complex where the priests lived, but they still don't know why the religious site appears to have strong [cultural connections](#) with Cyprus, which is located 300 miles away in the Mediterranean. And they don't know why such a large site—perhaps the largest Canaanite cult complex of the Late Bronze Age—was located so far from the coastal trade routes.

“How did these hillbilly Canaanites build this cult complex?” said Lipscomb University archaeologist Steven Ortiz, who joined the project in 2018, in an interview with CT.

Ongoing research at a mysterious mud-brick arch atop Tel Shimron in northern Israel uncovered [a great quantity of Canaanite cultic objects](#). Next to the arch, in a depression that's called a *favissa*—a place where sacrificial objects are discarded—researchers found two bronze bull figurines, which are typically connected to the worship of El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, or the storm god Baal. They also found 40,000 animal bones and 57,000 pottery shards, including remnants of a rare Minoan jug from Crete.

“In terms of religion, we don't have anything like this,” archaeologist Daniel Master said. “This is on a scale that we don't have anywhere else in this region.”

5. The gate of Shiloh

When the Israelites lost the ark of the covenant to the Philistines, the priest Eli fell off his chair and broke his neck at the gate of Shiloh (1 Sam. 4:18). In 2024, the excavation by the Associates for Biblical Research at Tel Shiloh [finished uncovering that gate](#).

“There's a niche in the fortification wall. We put a beam into that niche, and it goes right across the top of the pillars,” excavation director Scott Stripling told *Christianity Today*.

Near the pillars, archaeologists also found geometric paving stones forming a plaza, which is unexpected for that time.

In another area of the *tel*, or mound, excavators are uncovering the walls of a building the size of the biblical tabernacle, where the ark of the covenant was kept. They have also discovered a *favissa* with bones from sacrifices, pottery, and gold objects, which were apparently pendants.

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4. Redating a Jerusalem wall

A wall once attributed to King Hezekiah is now thought to have been built earlier by King Uzziah. This indicates that Jerusalem was expanding even before a flood of refugees arrived after the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 732 BC.

While that reassessment adds valuable insight into the history of the city, it's also a powerful example of what can be done with a creative combination of complementary technology to establish "absolute chronology."

Radiocarbon dating, normally a boon to archaeology, doesn't work very well for objects made during the Iron Age, due to a cosmic phenomenon known as the Hallstatt Plateau. This has limited the precise dating of archaeological discoveries in Jerusalem during its time as capital of the united Kingdom of Israel and then Judah. For a decade, archaeologists have worked to combine radiocarbon results in four different excavation areas with a precise single-year timeline derived from dendrochronology, the study of tree rings.

[This has led to several redatings](#), including the wall now attributed to King Uzziah.

3. The start of the alphabet

The earliest use of alphabetic writing has [been pushed back 500 years](#) through the discovery of four small fingers of clay in a tomb at Umm el-Marra in northern Syria. The tomb, which contained burials in gold and silver, was discovered in 2004 and carbon-dated to 2400 BC, the Early Bronze Age, when Umm el-Marra was a crossroad of trade routes between Aleppo and the Euphrates River.

Johns Hopkins University archaeologist Glenn Schwartz was positive about the dating but came slowly to the conclusion that he had found actual alphabetical writing. He went public with his conclusion at November's annual meeting of the American Society of Overseas Research.

"Previously, scholars thought the alphabet was invented in or around Egypt sometime after 1900 BCE," Schwartz said. "But our artifacts are older and from a different area on the map, suggesting the alphabet may have an entirely different origin story than we thought."

Numerous references to writing in the Old Testament seem to indicate a level of literacy that archaeology has been slow to support. But recent developments, including the discovery that [topped CT's 2022 archaeology list](#), are providing a fuller picture of early literacy.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

2. Jesus recognized in Germany

A silver amulet was found in an 1,800-year-old burial outside Frankfurt in 2018. In 2024, researchers were able to scan the item, virtually unrolling the thin amulet to [read](#) the Latin inscription inside, which says the amulet will “protect the man who surrenders himself to the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, since before Jesus Christ every knee bows: those in heaven, those on earth and those under the earth, and every tongue confesses.”

This discovery, announced in December, provides the earliest evidence of Christianity north of the Alps, indicating that Christianity spread to Northern Europe more quickly than had been thought. The person who wore it was buried between the year 230 and 270 AD.

1. A mosaic free from prison

The Megiddo Mosaic was discovered 20 years ago, but the amazing artifact, built for a small group of Christians who worshiped together about 200 years after the time of Jesus, was inaccessible behind prison walls. In 2024, it was [loaned](#) to the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, and is now widely available for public viewing.

The mosaic floor includes three well-preserved inscriptions, and one, in Greek, mentions “God Jesus Christ,” clearly testifying to the recognition of Jesus as more than a good teacher. The design shows the space was intentionally built for Christian worship. Centered on a Communion table, it more closely resembles a Jewish synagogue than the Roman basilica, and depicts two fish, the most popular Christian imagery before Constantine.

This is only the third church building that archaeologists have discovered that dates to the time before Constantine made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire. There is one at Dura-Europus in Syria and another at the location traditionally believed to be the apostle Peter’s house in Capernaum. Those were both houses converted for worship.

This mosaic floor was not discovered at Tel Megiddo, a famous archaeological site, but a few miles down the road during the renovation of a prison. The mosaic will be on display at the Museum of the Bible until July. It will eventually return to Israel.

This is an unusually good time to see biblical archaeology in US museums. In addition to the Megiddo Mosaic, the IAA has a permanent display at the Museum of the Bible called People of the Land, and the IAA also has a traveling exhibit on the Dead Sea Scrolls, which is [currently at the Reagan library in California](#).

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The Tel Dan Stele, which includes the first known reference to the house of David, is on display at [the Jewish Museum in New York City](#) through January 5. And [Discovering the World of Jesus](#), which includes the controversial James Ossuary with the inscription “James, the son of Joseph, the brother of Jesus,” is on display in Atlanta.

An ivory comb from Tel Lachish with the earliest-known, full-sentence alphabetical inscription will be on [display](#) at the Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum in Tennessee beginning January 27. That was number 1 on our [2022 list](#).

Gordon Govier writes about biblical archaeology for Christianity Today, hosts the archaeology radio program [The Book and The Spade](#), and is the editor of Artifax.

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<https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/12/top-10-biblical-archaeology-discovery-list-2024/>

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