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The Economic Downturn Hits Biblical Archaeology

JEFFREY R. ZORN

PROFESSORS OF BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY standing in bread lines? Well, no—at least not yet. The downturn in the economy, however, has hit the fields of Biblical archaeology and ancient Near Eastern studies particularly hard.

Even in the best of times, it is difficult to find a permanent job in these fields. The number of new Ph.D.s entering the job market every year almost always surpasses the number of available positions in universities, museums or antiquities departments. Scholars who teach Hebrew or Biblical archaeology are in a slightly better position than those teaching Hittite, for example, because these fields are more popular and are taught in a variety of seminaries and liberal arts colleges. However, because these fields are so popular, more people earn Ph.D.s in them, meaning the competition for available jobs is still fierce.

Freshly minted Ph.D.s often hope either to land a full-time teaching job right away or, as is more common, to obtain postdoctoral fellowships that provide new scholars the opportunity to conduct research, develop their publication records and acquire valuable teaching experience. Hopefully the fellowships, publications and teaching experience make them more attractive on the job market, thereby increasing their chances of eventually landing a tenure-track job. Some do land such jobs, while others move from one temporary position to another like academic nomads. Still others decide simply to leave the field altogether.

This is how things have been, but with the economy as it is now, new difficulties have arisen that may be unfamiliar to BAR readers. For example, many professors, like others in the education fields, do not have pension funds but instead have retirement accounts invested in the stock and bond markets. With the markets down 30 to 40 percent during the past year, the value of these retirement accounts has plummeted, meaning that many senior faculty who might like to retire are reluctant to do so because they may not have enough to live on in retirement.

There is an ancillary problem to this. If senior professors do not retire, there will be fewer jobs available for younger scholars. And even if professors do retire, universities are now in a budget-cutting mood; they are much more likely to fill "necessary" positions in English, economics and engineering than those in perceived "luxury" fields like Near Eastern studies. Because they fear that their schools may eliminate their positions entirely if they retire, some senior faculty are thus unwilling to step down until

the economy improves and there is a chance their positions will be filled.

There is a host of other ways in which the economy is affecting the field. The University of Pennsylvania's ill-advised decision to close its world-renowned Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology (MASCA) is at least partly due to the economy. Similarly, the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) could not offer some excavation grants this year because of their declining endowment. The number of volunteers signing up for digs was also down this year, as were donations to excavation projects. It is, of course, the hard work and financial contributions of hundreds of volunteers each year that make digs possible. For these reasons, some digs went into the field facing uncertain financial futures. The current financial crisis has led to scaled-back projects for the moment, but if the crisis continues or recovery is slow, who knows what will happen to field work, let alone the even-slower pace of publication.

At my school, Cornell University, the deans in Arts and Sciences have decreed budget cuts of about 10 percent for each of the next three years. This has had a dramatic impact on the Department of Near Eastern Studies and the Program in Archaeology. The result will be higher fees and less financial aid for students, including teaching assistantships. Non-tenure-track faculty are being laid off in some cases.

This is where my story comes in. Since 1997 I have been a spousal hire in the Department of Near Eastern Studies (NES). This means that my wife was hired into a tenure-track position and the university provided "soft money" to hire me to teach. My NES and archaeology colleagues have been great supporters of my work over these years. I have taught classes on the history, religion and archaeology of ancient Israel, daily life in the ancient world, Jerusalem through the ages, as well as first-year English. I have taken students to Israel to participate in the excavations at Tel Dor; I have published articles, spoken at conferences, advised students and served on committees—nearly all the same responsibilities as my tenure-track colleagues. However, budget cuts often hit smaller departments such as NES much harder than larger ones, and after making every possible effort to save my position, NES was unable to renew my contract for this year.

So, like many middle-aged Americans, I find myself at a crossroads. Will I be able to find work in my field somewhere in central New York, or will I have to leave

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Biblical Views

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By the early third century, Christians in many locations were beginning to enjoy a measure of security and strength. This encouraged such thinkers as Tertullian of Carthage to begin reshaping their self-understanding and, along with that, their lexicon. Tertullian saw a new potential in Ignatius's "Christianism." He began to use its Latin form (*Christianismus*) for something much more than a clever alternative to Judaizing: It could stand for a whole system of belief and practice (i.e., Christianity). Although the category had not existed before, a true *-ism* was born.

Part of the attraction of creating this new category of *-isms* was that it invited the shaping of the rest of the world in comparable terms. So were born "Judaism" (Latin *Iudaismus*) and "paganism" (*paganitas*), reducing the two great cultural traditions against which Christians had struggled for so long to a more manageable size. Paradoxically, Christians

appear to have invented both Judaism and paganism.

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¹This column is an abbreviated form of an essay I wrote for *Bible and Interpretation* (www.bibleinterp.com), August 2009.

²The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (www.tlg.uci.edu) is a research center at the University of California, Irvine. It has collected and digitized most literary texts written in Greek from Homer to the 15th century C.E.

³See, e.g., Tacitus, *Histories* 5.4.

⁴See Galatians 1:13–14 and Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians* 10 and *Letter to the Philadelphians* 6.

Philadelphia, is not surrounded by a score or more of small liberal arts colleges.

I will just have to wait and see. I hope Cornell will be able to rehire me someday because I love teaching here. The almost-humorous irony is that back in the rosier days of the fall of 2007, my department offered me a semester of sabbatical leave because they so valued my contributions over the years. The sabbatical happened to fall at the same time as the ax. So, just as I am finishing up my part of the Tel Dor site report, I find myself in this employment predicament and wondering about unemployment benefits. Brother, can you spare a teaching position?

Jeffrey R. Zorn was an adjunct professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University. He has worked extensively at Tel Dor on the coast of Israel and has also published numerous studies on the site of Tell en-Nasbeh, probably Biblical Mizpah of Benjamin. A complete list of his publications can be found at: www.arts.cornell.edu/jrz3.

STRATA ANSWERS

What Is It? (from p. 20)

Answer: C) Minoan sistrum

A common musical instrument in Egypt, the sistrum was used to accompany singing and dancing. When a musician would shake the metal sistrum, the instrument's discs would hit against one another and the loop, creating a vigorous rhythmic sound. This clay sistrum, measuring 7 by 2 inches, was found along with five others in a burial cave on Crete, at the remote inland site of Haghios Charalampos. It is dated to 2100–1700 B.C., during the period of Minoan settlement on the island. It is not clear whether this sistrum was in fact used to make music or whether it was a symbolic copy of a metal sistrum, perhaps created solely as a ritual funerary object. What is clear from finds like this one is that Egyptian culture exerted a strong cultural influence on the Minoan civilization of Crete.

How Many? (from p. 24)

Answer: 25

No archaeological tour of Israel or Jordan is complete without an excursion to a Roman theater. These architectural marvels, which are found in abundance on both sides of the Jordan River, are often so well preserved that a modern visitor can still experience the same sights and sounds that greeted the theater's audience 2,000 years ago.

But despite their ubiquity and seemingly obvious function, the more than two dozen theaters found in Israel and Jordan defy any straightforward explanation. Contrary to their appellation, most of the theaters were neither built nor frequented by Romans. From their first appearance in Palestine and Transjordan during the first century B.C., the theaters were the work of powerful local rulers who sought to cloak themselves and their kingdoms in the cultural mantle of Hellenic civilization.

Herod the Great, for example, had several theaters built throughout Judea, the largest and most imposing of which overlooked the Mediterranean at the

coastal city of Caesarea. Likewise, the Nabataean kings of Transjordan built several theaters across their desert kingdom, including a 6,000-seat structure that was chiseled almost entirely from the natural sandstone bedrock of Petra. With the rise of the distinctly Hellenized cities of the Decapolis in the first and second centuries A.D., even more theaters were erected across the urban landscape of Roman Palestine, including Beth Shean, Jerash (ancient Gerasa), Amman (ancient Philadelphia) and Shechem.

While these magnificent structures were certainly intended to emulate Hellenistic and Roman theatrical venues, the local audience for tragedies and comedies acted in Greek and Latin was small, quite possibly limited to members of the royal court and foreign dignitaries. For local village audiences, the theaters were the stage for short satirical skits and mime performances on everyday life and society. More than anything, however, theaters—and the events they hosted—were political symbols that served to confirm a ruler's equal standing in an increasingly Hellenized world.



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