



American Academy for
Jewish Research



Nahman Avigad (1905-1992)

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Source: *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* , 1992, Vol. 58 (1992), pp. 1-5



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NAHMAN AVIGAD
(1905–1992)

With the death of Nahman Avigad on January 28, 1992 Israel and the scholarly world have lost a pioneer and pacesetter in the fields of the archaeology of Eretz Israel and language and literature of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic. At the age of 86 Avigad was active up to the very end of his career; and what may turn out to be his crowning achievement, his *Corpus of Northwest Semitic Seals*, was virtually complete at the time of his death and will be published by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Those of us who were privileged to know Professor Avigad and to have studied or worked with him knew him to be a quiet, unassuming person who at the same time possessed considerable presence and power. The former qualities were especially surprising in view of his unparalleled successes in field excavation and academic publication. At the same time, when it was time to exercise his influence and power, Avigad never hesitated to do so. Only a few years ago during a long visit to his house he reflected on the “younger” generation of scholars in Israel, many of who in his view, no longer were equipped to deal with the wide range of issues related to the general field of biblical archaeology. He lamented their overspecialization and their lack of training in biblical studies and the languages and literatures of the periods in which they worked. His standards were set by the late Yigael Yadin and by his near contemporary Benjamin Mazar. Avigad’s work when viewed in its entirety is an appropriate expression of the inter-relatedness of all the subdisciplines that are essential for an in-depth and integrated reconstruction of the history and culture of the Jewish people from early biblical times until the talmudic period.

Avigad was born in the Galician town of Zawalow, formerly Austria, today the Ukraine, on September 25, 1905; his parents

were Perl and Isak Reiss. He was educated in Brno, Czechoslovakia, where at the university he completed an undergraduate degree in architecture. He immigrated to Israel in 1925. In the same long conversation with him in June of 1990 already mentioned above, I asked him how as a young immigrant trained in architecture he had turned to archaeology. With uncharacteristic emotion he told me of his participation in a Zionist youth group, a central focus of which was a periodic hike and camping trip to sites of historical interest. He recalled an unforgettable hike from Jerusalem down the Wadi Qelt to the site of what is today known as "Old Testament" Jericho, that is, the site to the north end of the oasis where Dame Kathleen Kenyon was to excavate some three decades later. Avigad's youth group camped out by the site and his guide told stories about events of biblical and Jewish history that were believed to have occurred in that very location. After that evening Avigad knew he would spend the rest of his life uncovering the details of the history of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.

In 1929 Avigad entered the Hebrew University and embarked on an intimate association with the Department of Archaeology that was to span more than sixty years. After twenty years and extensive involvement in field activities Avigad received his M.A. in 1949. He received the Ph.D. in 1952, writing on the ancient necropolis of Jerusalem. This project, later published by the Bialik Press in 1954 as *Mašebôt Qedumôt be-Naḥal Qidrôn*, embraced many of the interests that were to occupy him for the rest of his career: the history, archaeology, and architecture of Jerusalem, especially the Old City, and Hebrew epigraphy.

Avigad's field training in archaeology, began under the tutelage of E.L. Sukenik, who had trained at Dropsie College in Philadelphia and whose role in acquiring some of the Dead Sea Scrolls for Israel in 1947 and 1948 was so pivotal. He worked with Sukenik at the ancient synagogue excavations at Beth Alpha in 1929 and at the ancient synagogue excavations at

Hamath-Gader in 1932. In 1953 Avigad assumed the directorship of the excavations at the elaborate catacombs at Beth She'arim where he had also excavated with Mazar decades earlier. His report on his own work there appeared in 1971 under the title *Beth She'arim III: The Catacombs 12-23* and was published by the Israel Exploration Society. It included both the material remains and the inscriptions as well as comments and interpretations on the meaning of this burial center for rabbinic Judaism.

Avigad formally joined the ranks of the Hebrew University faculty in 1949 where he rose to Professor of Archaeology. It was during the 1950's that his interests in epigraphy and language peaked and his collaboration with Yadin, Sukenik's son, culminated in their joint publication, *A Genesis Apocryphon: A Scroll from the Wilderness of Judah* (Israel Exploration Society, 1956). Avigad's fascination with the Scrolls and with ancient seals led him to detailed palaeographical analysis of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic scripts. This aspect of his work resulted in the emergence of palaeography as one of the most reliable and major tools of dating in all archaeology and Avigad was without peer in Israel in the general field of epigraphy and palaeography. Professor Frank Cross of Harvard University has called his paper on the Royal Steward Inscription "the single most brilliant paper that has been written in this field in the past 50 years." His 1976 study, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-Exilic Judean Archive*, published by the Hebrew University, Institute of Archaeology, *Qedem IV*, illuminated the period from Zerubabel (ca. 520 B.C.E.) to the first half of the fifth century as no other group of epigraphic data ever had. His 1986 publication of another extraordinary archive of ancient written remains from the eighth century B.C.E., *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah*, published by the Israel Exploration Society, was also breathtaking in its range and skill.

Many will remember Avigad, however, as one of the main excavators of the Old City of Jerusalem, an undertaking which he began in 1969 and continued until 1983. Avigad became

Professor of Archaeology Emeritus in 1974 at the peak of his work in the Old City, and no one who visited him from that time on could have thought of him in any way as “retired” or “emeritus.” In every sense Avigad was rejuvenated by his hard work, exhausting schedule, and string of stunning archaeological discoveries. He walked faster and worked harder, as if defying time. This work ultimately assumed two definitive forms: one written, the other preserved in stone. The Hebrew edition came first in 1980, followed in 1983 by its English version, *Discovering Jerusalem*, published by Thomas Nelson, which received rave reviews by virtually everyone and ranks as one of the finest examples of integrated writing on history and archaeology. Although it was never intended to be a final report, which will surely come one day with the assistance of Hillel Geva, it stands as a shining tribute to his masterful work on Jerusalem from the First Temple period through the Second Temple period until the time of Justinian in the sixth century C.E.

In a very real sense the development of the Jewish Quarter came to a standstill over Avigad’s brilliant work. The excavation of the *cardo maximus* temporarily brought modern building projects around it to a halt but ultimately new shops were built and tourists came to visit it; the erection of a rabbinical academy was halted until plans for a museum under its foundations could be completed; and the largest segment of the wall on the western hill of Jerusalem from the eighth century B.C.E. rerouted traffic and buildings and people. The end result, however, of what we might call “development archaeology” has been the creation of a series of Jewish Quarter museums and tourist locations that rival the Wailing Wall and Temple Mount in historical importance and sheer beauty. No more fitting a testimony to Avigad’s career could exist than these living memorials and monuments in the city he loved so dearly. Today hardly any visitor to the Old City leaves before visiting The Burnt House, or The Herodian Quarter—Vohl Archaeological Museum, and what is surely a segment of Hezekiah’s

wall (2 Chron 32:2–5; Isa 22:10). What an appropriate memorial to a man of such singular achievements! His numerous accomplishments were recognized in Israel by the receipt of The Bialik Prize in Jewish Studies in 1955, The Israel Prize in 1977, The Percia Shimmel Prize of the Israel Museum in 1979, The Rothschild Prize in the Humanities in 1984, and in 1984 he was named “Yaqqîr” of Jerusalem, which perhaps best testifies to his unique role in the holy city.

Nahman Avigad has established a legacy in stone and in writing that will endure forever. He has also set an academic standard that will inspire and set the tone for generations to come.

Eric M. Meyers