

Interview to Prof. Giorgio Buccellati (GB) and Prof. Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati (MKB)

“Con la arqueología, la Biblia no resulta pura retórica”

by María Martínez López / @missymml

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“With Archaeology, the Bible is not Mere Rhetoric”

Interview/The Bible displays a view on the absolute which is “structurally different” to other surrounding conceptions; thus the archaeologist Giorgio Buccellati who visited the Univesidad San Dámaso in Madrid.

Many people consider the Ancient Testament only as a mythologem. What can archaeology teach to us?

– Giorgio Buccellati: Regardless of the historicity of the singular episodes, the core is that the Bible presents a way of knowledge structurally different to the rest of the cultures of the ancient Middle East. In them, and, in general, throughout the development of knowledge human, reality has been divided into a series of pieces which can be separated and put back together. In Mesopotamia this way of knowing the absolute is projected in the fragmentation of the concept of divinity: this is the core of polytheism. Instead, the Bible proposes a view of the absolute which always remains a whole. The actual historicity matters less than this singularity and the fact that it cannot be deduced from a former worldview.

Can we deduce so much about a culture from archaeology?

– GB: There are two types of sources: the written ones, speaking of daily and historical facts, but also of love or death, and the archaeological ones.

– Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati: For instance, skulls dating back 1.8 million years were found at Dmanisi, Georgia, a Lower Palaeolithic site. One of them had no teeth and we know that he lived as such for three years. Someone worried that he could eat. That is the first time humans have been seen caring about old people. For that time no burials remained. But from this evidence we know that they had a concept of both charity and death. They knew that if they didn’t feed that person he would die.

Do the archaeological finds coincide with what the Bible tells about Israel and its relationship with other peoples?

– GB: The surrounding towns knew the kings and cities of Israel, and they fit biblical narration. They also described elements of the political situation in considerable detail. Israel’s defeat against Assyria in 721 BC and the exile in Babylon [587-537 BC, Author’s note] are very well documented. There is

much less evidence of the story of Abraham and the patriarchs or the departure from Egypt, but the overall context fits the narrative well.

Does all this knowledge influence how to we faith?

– GB: Knowing so closely the world of that time allows us to identify us with the most human dimension of the Bible, developing a certain sensitivity towards its cultural matrix. It is not something distant or purely rhetorical.

– MKB: For me, an example is that of the bleeding woman, an important character in the Gospel. She had a lot of courage to admit an intimate feminine problem like this. The hem of Jesus' robe she touched was the most important part of the garments, the only decorated one. In an excavation we find an indication of its importance. On a tablet reporting a contract, a witness had signed by pressing the edge of his cloak to imprint its decoration, as a sign of identity. So, touching the hem of Jesus' robe was like touching Jesus.

Your research has mostly focused on Urkesh, northeast Syria, and Hurrian culture. Have you found any other light on the Bible there?

– MKB: We discovered a large underground pit with circles made of bones of piglets and dog puppies. We believe that it was used for necromancy, because the Hittites (whose culture was influenced by the Hurrians) offered these animals to the deities of the underworld. In the Bible, the necromancer of Endor, whom king Saul asks to invoke the spirit of Samuel, also acted in a pit.

Unfortunately, there is no shortage of conflicts in the Middle East. Is there any lost archaeological information that we are not aware about?

– GB: A lot. When leaving the sites, there may be looting. Before the war, there were 100 excavations in Syria, and all of them have been abandoned, except for one on the coast and ours at Urkesh. It is unique, because we have developed a very intense program of local participation involving everyone, even children and farmers, for instance with conferences in villages of just 40 inhabitants. This has saved the site because the population identifies with it and no one dares to touch it, even though we are not physically there. We have offered local groups (Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians and Yazidis) a historical place that everyone can be proud of, that needs all of them, and that helps them getting along better and avoiding terrorist ideology. We, intellectuals in the West, should do more along these lines. We think of fighting ISIS in military terms, but not in cultural and social terms, while people see the West more and more as inauthentic, and they turn to ISIS and similar forces to satisfy their hunger for ideals.