

HOW TO TELL A TEL

Israel is a land of hills and mountains. In fact, the first-time visitor to the country often is amazed at how little flat land there is. After several days, most travelers will notice that Israel is dotted with a certain kind of hill, one that is especially important to students of the Bible. This hill is called a *tel* (Hebrew) or *tell* (Arabic). With its steep sides and flat top, it looks like a large coffee table, especially if it is in a valley and viewed from above.

What is a *tel*, and what gives it its distinctive shape?

A SETTLEMENT BEGINS

The environment of the Middle East is harsh and mostly unsuitable for settlement. For a location to be habitable, three conditions must exist. First, there must be a source of fresh water. Fresh water is limited in Israel. Rainfall is plentiful in some areas, but most of it falls only during the winter months. In ancient times, many communities existed on rain-water stored in cisterns. This supply was totally dependent upon the notoriously erratic seasonal rains. If a season went by with below-average rainfall, cisterns dried up, and people abandoned their city. If an enemy laid siege to a city, only the cisterns inside the city walls were available, and often that water supply ran out and the city fell. For this reason, communities thrived only where there was an abundant supply of spring-water. Jerusalem was built next to the spring of Gihon. Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer had tunnels dug through bedrock to reach fresh water. Without an abundant water supply, no settlement could grow.

The second condition necessary for a community to exist was an occupation that produced a consistent food supply. Many settlements prospered by farming. Olive trees flourished in Judea and Galilee. Wheat was raised in the valleys of Judea and the Valley of Jezreel. Shepherds took their sheep into the wilderness, searching for pasture and water for their flocks. Other cities were successful with industry. Chorazin and Ekron had large olive oil processing facilities. Jerusalem was famous for its purple dye. A few cities existed by supplying people on the Via Maris, the major trade route through the country.

The third prerequisite for a successful settlement was a defensible location. The political climate in the Middle East was volatile. Therefore, cities were built on hills ringing fertile valleys. Jerusalem began on a long, narrow hill, then spread across a valley to encompass another hill. Azekah was on a hill overlooking the Elah Valley, site of David's confrontation with Goliath. These hills enabled cities to defend themselves, even during an extended siege.

When all three conditions existed—water, occupation, and strategic location—a settlement began.

A SETTLEMENT GROWS

Eventually, the settlement grew large enough to require a wall and a gate. The king or ruler would build a palace and a temple, and the people would build houses, usually haphazardly, inside the city wall. Often, a steeply sloped rampart was built against the wall to protect the hill from erosion and to keep enemies away from the foot of the wall. Over time, the ramparts were replaced or covered with others. These buried walls and ramparts holding the hill together gave it its steep, straight shape.

A SETTLEMENT IS ABANDONED

As the city prospered, it became an attractive prize, and enemies would lay siege to it, sometimes penetrating the defenses and destroying the population. Armies were often brutal in their conquests. Occasionally, they remained as an occupying force, but usually they marched off, leaving behind smoking ruins. Israel's conquest of Canaan followed this pattern.

Whether because of droughts, wars, or some other reason, once-prosperous cities were sometimes abandoned. Sand carried by the relentless Middle East wind would gradually cover the streets and houses. Nomads would arrive, pitch their tents, then move on. Soon the ruins blended into the landscape.

A NEW SETTLEMENT BEGINS

The conditions for life in this location remained, however. The water source continued or, in the case of drought, the rain returned. The farmland or pastureland was still there, and the hill still offered an effective defense. Eventually, people came back and resettled. Lacking the heavy equipment needed to remove the debris of former inhabitants, the newcomers filled in holes, gathered the larger building stones, leveled off the hill, and began to rebuild on the remains of the old settlement. Soon another prosperous community developed. Inevitably, its success attracted enemies, and the cycle of destruction resumed.

A LAYER CAKE OF CITIES

Over centuries and even millennia, as each settlement built upon the last one, the hill grew higher and higher. This growing mound of cities has been compared to a layer cake, each layer representing a civilization long since disappeared from history. Archaeologists call these layers strata (singular: stratum). Beth Shean has 18 or more strata, Jerusalem has at least 21, and Megiddo has even more. Locked within these layers are pottery, jewelry, weapons, documents, gates, temples, palaces, and houses, all waiting for archaeologists to uncover their stories.

A GIFT FROM GOD

Our belief in the Bible is based on our faith in God and not on the discoveries of archaeologists. But archaeologists can help us better understand the message of the Bible by pulling us into ancient times, making them more relevant today. From artifacts unearthed at *tels*, we know how the people during biblical times lived, what they ate, how they worshiped, what their customs were, and many other important details. *Tels* help bring the Bible alive and make its message clearer.

For that reason, each *tel* provides a unique gift from God to better understand His Word.