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## The Kiriath-Jearim Archaeological Mission

Thomas Römer

Collège de France and UMR 7192

Under the joint direction of Israël Finkelstein (Tel Aviv University), Christophe Nicolle (CNRS – Collège de France) and Thomas Römer (Collège de France), a new archaeological mission in Israel, at Deir el-Azar (the former Kiriath-Jearim or Kiriath-Ba'al) will start in the summer of 2017 from the 1st to the 31st of August. This mission (entitled *The Vlad and Sana Shmunis Archeological Excavation at Biblical Kiriath-Jearim*) is a joint project of the University of Tel Aviv and the Collège de France.

### **Kiriath-Jearim: an important location in the Hebrew Bible**

The biblical town of Kiriath-Jearim (Greek: Cariathiarim) is strategically positioned on one of Judea's highest hills (756m), 12km West of Jerusalem and very close to West of Abu Gosh. In Hebrew, the name Kiriath-Jearim means 'town of forests'. Its Arabic name (Deir el-Azar) may come from a reference to Eleazar who, according to 1 Samuel 7, 1-2, took care of the Ark of the Covenant when it was brought to Kiriath-Jearim: *'The people of Kiriath-Jearim came and had Yahweh's Ark mounted; they built it in the home of Abinadab, on the hill, and they chose his son Eleazar to guard the Ark of Yahweh. Much time had passed since the Ark was placed at Kiriath-Jearim; twenty years had gone by. Then the whole house of Israel cried out to Yahweh...'*

The site is mentioned several times in the Bible, notably as the temporary resting place for the Ark of the Covenant, as a frontier town between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and again in genealogical references and a list of people returning from exile.<sup>1</sup> The first book of Samuel (chapters 4-6) recounts in particular that the Ark of the Covenant had been taken by the Philistines following the defeat of Israel at the battle of Eben-Ezer. The presence of the sacred object, however, would have brought curses upon the land of the Philistines, who would have been forced to return it to Israel. It was at that moment that the Ark would have been placed in Abinadav's house at Kiriath-Jearim, and it was only decades later that king David would have had it brought to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6).

These references reveal the importance of Kiriath-Jearim which otherwise was probably the location of a temple to Ba'al, as is suggested by its earlier name: Kiriath-Ba'al (Josh 15,60; 18,14), Baala (Josh 15,9.11; cf. Baalath in 1 R 9,18; 2 Ch 8,6), or Baale-

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<sup>1</sup>The name Kiriath-Jearim appears more precisely in Joshua 9,17; 15,9.60; 18,14.15; Judges 18,12; 1 Samuel 6,21; 7,1.2; Jeremiah 26,20; Nehemiah 7,29; 1 Chronicles 2,50.52.53; 13,5.6; and 2 Chronicles 1.4.

Juda (2 Sam 6,2). It is also established that the Romans had put an outpost at Kiriath-Jearim along the road from Jerusalem to Antipatris (Tel Aphek), as shown by the Latin inscriptions in the surrounding area.

### **A still unexplored site**

In 1905, a farmer discovered a semi-circular wall with mosaics as he was working at the hill summit. Brief digs revealed in particular column bases and capitals and further mosaics: these were the remains of a 5th century Byzantine church. In 1911, Josephine Rumèbe, a French nun bought this land and founded the congregation of the sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition. She had the convent of Our Lady of the Ark of the Covenant and its church built on this site.

The site measures approximately 250m by 250m, a mound of more than 6 hectares in area, which makes it one of the largest Iron age mounds in this hilly region. Several years ago, a surface collection undertaken by an archaeologist working on Israeli antiquities allowed a first evaluation of the different occupations of the site, revealing some shards from the old and middle Bronze ages (3rd and 2nd millennia) but above all it indicated a significant occupation during the Iron age (Iron I: 1100-900 BCE) and Iron II (900-750 BCE) with the possibility of an improvement in flattening the top of the mound.

It is one of the rare biblical sites not yet excavated which, judging by the place it occupies in biblical texts, was possibly an important town and religious centre. Other than the site of the small monastery at the top, the mound is well preserved because its slopes still serve exclusively the cultivation of olive trees. The archaeological levels are therefore both well protected and accessible.

### **Goals and means of the Kiriath-Jearim archaeological mission**

The objective of the excavation is to bring new primary information about the history of the Judean hills country in particular and that of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel in general. The excavated material will allow a better understanding of the status, the expanse and the organisation of these kingdoms' territories during the Iron age. The excavation will also allow the determination as to whether on the hills of Judah there was a temple (dedicated to the god Ba'al?) contemporary with that of the first temple of Jerusalem, an important question in for our knowledge of the ancient Israelite religion. Furthermore, the excavation will allow a better understanding of the historical background concerning important biblical passages, notably the so-called 'Ark narrative'.

The archaeological mission at Kiriath-Jearim has obtained permission to excavate from the local authorities as well as the agreement of the monastery, which owns the land. It will benefit from the infrastructure of the archaeological mission of Megiddo,

known for its cutting-edge methods in the field of archaeology. It will therefore have access to the most advanced methods and techniques to carry out the excavations, the recording of data and all necessary analysis. The excavations will involve some sixty experienced and student researchers from Israel, France and other countries. This international cooperation will mark a renewal in French archaeological activities regarding the Iron age era in Israel.

For more information, please consult the archaeological mission's internet site:

<https://kiriathjearim.wordpress.com/>



Figure 1: Kiriath-Jearim, courtesy of William Schlegel, *Satellite Bible Atlas*