

DIGGING THE BIBLE

What is the archeological evidence for Old Testament history?
Theology professor Dr. Deirdre Dempsey uses her expertise in
ancient languages — and old-fashioned sweat labor — to find out.



During the summers, Dr. Deirdre Dempsey's day can start at 6 a.m. and include hours spent digging inch by inch through hot, dusty Syrian soil in search of a fragment of history.

It's not the typical life of a theology professor, but Dempsey's expertise in ancient languages makes her a valued asset on archeological digs. She's part of the team that since the early 1980s has excavated off and on at Tell Qarqur in Syria, a project sponsored by the American Schools of Oriental Research and the University of Arkansas.

The 56-acre site, located in the Orontes River valley in northwest Syria, is significant because the annals of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III mention a battle that Shalmaneser fought at a place called Qarqar, near the Orontes River, in mid-ninth century B.C. "In a list of the enemies he fought at this battle, he included King Ahab of Israel," Dempsey says. "So we hope that we have the site of this ancient battle."

Dempsey specializes in Northwest Semitic languages, including Hebrew and Aramaic, and teaches a course at Marquette called Digging the Bible.

When she is not away on archeology digs, she publishes on other topics related to the Old Testament in journals such as *Vetus Testamentum*, *Biblische Notizen*, *The Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, *Orientalia* and *The Bible Today*.

Originally from a Navy family, she spent some of her childhood living in Cairo, Egypt, where she marveled at the pyramids and other ancient wonders. "That whetted my appetite in historical artifacts and whet my appetite in other languages as well," she says.

She fell in love with archeology as an undergraduate. "I got into archeology through the back door," she says. "I was very interested in historical background for the Old Testament — any archeological evidence for Old Testament narrative."

Dempsey first traveled to Syria to dig at the Tell Qarqur site more than 20 years ago. Thus far, the team has not turned up any artifacts that contain writing. But Dempsey's translation skills were put to the test on earlier digs at Tell Nimrin, Jordan, where archeologists found nine pottery fragments (called ostraca) and one seal impression with inscriptions

in an Aramaic cursive script dating to 400 B.C.

Inscriptions are usually found on pottery fragments. "You always find a ton of broken-up pottery, which is good because you can date the period you're digging through," Dempsey explains. If there is an inscription, it's often mundane.

"You're not going to find the Epic of Gilgamesh," Dempsey says. "It's more like 'Don't forget to bring the milk home.'"

Still, those details can reveal information about the people who once called that place home. At Tell Nimrin, Dempsey's team found a piece of pottery with three lines of writing that included names. "That tells you something about the population of an area," she says.

She usually spends eight weeks on a dig, working as both the team epigrapher and a site supervisor. She plans to return to Syria in summer 2009.

Although modern tools, such as ground-penetrating radar, make the job easier, archeology is still deliberate, slow work. The team has covered only a few acres of the massive site at Tell Qarqur. "It's hard physical work. It's actually exhausting," she says. Digging starts at 6 a.m. and usually ends around lunchtime, when it gets too hot to work. Still, windy weather with temperatures in the 90s and 100s is "not too bad," in her opinion — while digging in Jordan, she endured 120-degree days on the edge of the Dead Sea.

There are other occupational hazards, including scorpions and pit vipers, also known as two-step snakes. "Because you have two



Pages 14-15 and above: Dr. Deirdre Dempsey out in the field at Tell Qarqur, Syria. Images courtesy of Dr. Jesse Casana and the Tell Qarqur Expedition.

steps and that's it — you're dead," Dempsey explains with a wry smile.

Tell Qarqur is believed to have a 10,000-year history of occupation, and the earliest excavations turned up artifacts from 2,000 B.C. The team has found artifacts, including incense burners called cultic stands, which indicate there was once a temple there. The team also found an idol figure of the sort mentioned in Genesis.

"We know we have the site of significant cities, cities that had been around for millennia," she says.

But what Dempsey really wants to find is something with inscription that could be deciphered. After all, that's why she's there.

"The language I'm hoping we're going to find is Aramaic," she says. "It's exactly the sort of thing that I'd love to find because it might give some evidence to prove or disprove if we are actually digging the ancient Qarqur. I still think it's there."



LOST IN TRANSLATION

Dempsey doesn't need to go halfway around the world to ply her expertise. "Anything to do with Northwest Semitic languages — that's what I'm most interested in researching," she says. She spent seven years assisting in the revision of the Old Testament as an editorial board member for the New American Bible.

She's written several articles on translations of Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic) and Christian Arabic texts. Most recently she wrote an article to suggest a reinterpretation for Ecclesiastes 12:4.

"We have this problematic verse in Ecclesiastes that everyone will say is problematic," Dempsey explains. "I'm not changing the theology. It's a way of trying to make sense of something that hasn't made sense."

In another recent paper, Dempsey analyzes early Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew texts to see what early scholars believed about the language of the generation of the Tower of Babel and the origin of writing. Was the original language Hebrew? Or was it Syriac?

"I'm interested in the early scholars who debated that question," she says. "I hope that these texts can help shed some light on the scholarly exchanges, direct or indirect, among the three Abrahamic traditions."

