



Tantur: Hill in the Holy Land

Episode 2: Unearthing the Past

[NAT sound: Car]

[VO]

It's 5:30 AM in Israel.

We're riding in a minivan taxi. Israel is a small country, and from our home base at Tantur, everything is perhaps an hour or 90 minutes away. In this case, about 50 minutes.

I have Google Maps up on my phone, because our driver really has no idea where we're going. And that's not his fault, necessarily. We're not going to someplace around Jerusalem, or to Tel Aviv or Bethlehem. We're heading to meet up with a group of Notre Dame theology masters students at an archaeology site. They'll have a couple of hours of work in by the time we arrive.

The sun is coming up and we're getting a look at the country that we haven't seen quite yet. Steep crags and valleys as we wind through the Judean hill country. The sagebrush on the hills provides dots of deep green against an otherwise deep, rust colored brown. At the valley base, lush vineyards and orchards and fields.

If you're looking for a way to understand the topography and climate here, one way is to think of California. Israel looks and feels a lot like the golden state. But if you're looking for a way to understand the land on a deeper level, and how it's formed our understanding of tradition for better or for

worse...well, one way to do that is to dig. That's where we're heading.

But for now, we drive.

I'm Andy Fuller, and you're listening to Notre Dame Stories' Tantur: Hill in the Holy Land.

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[VO]
We're reaching our destination. We drive up a 400-foot hill, then carry our gear on foot another 100 feet or so to the summit. And that's when we meet up with Avi Winitzer, the Jordan Kapson Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Notre Dame.

[Winitzer]
We are at Tel Azekah, a considerably important, large site between the Judean Hills and the Philistine Lowlands, at an excavation being led by Tel Aviv University and Heidelberg University in Germany for 6 or 7 seasons now.

Specifically and most interestingly, the relationship between the Judean Kingdom to the east and the Philistine lands to our west. We're at the borderline, and this area is of great significance to understand the kingdom.

[VO]
It's quite possible you don't remember hearing of Azekah. But I'll bet you've heard the story of what took place here.

[Winitzer]
Biblically we have a few attestations in the Old Testament, the most famous one in 1 Samuel 17 when David meets Goliath. A lot of it is story, if you will, but the facts are facts, the place is mentioned and the battle takes place between this mound that we're on and the mound to my right.

Beyond the Bible, you have attestations from other sources, the most important one is from the neo-Assyrian era - the Assyrians are the ones who came in the 8th century BC and almost destroyed Judah, they did destroy the Northern Kingdoms of Israel. And in one particular case Sennacherib, who almost destroyed Judah in 701 BC, sends a letter about his campaign to this part of the country and names this site, Azekah.

[VO]

In his letter, Sennacherib describes Azekah as a city with towers pointing to the sky like swords. Which means whatever was here before, it was significant in scale. Archaeologists working here since 2012 have made incredible discoveries. Several years ago, 5 human skeletons were discovered. They were found in a cowering position, suggesting they met an untimely end. There appeared to be blunt force trauma, and a fire.

It's possible these were victims of one of the many invasions in Azekah's long history. The site dates back at least to the Canaanite period, 2400 BC. That's before the Israelites were here. Before anyone was here, that we know of.

The leader of the dig site since 2012 has been Oded Lipschits, the director of Tel Aviv University's institute of archaeology. He's a wonderfully genial man whose passion for his homeland and his work is abundantly clear. I asked him for a sort of lay-of-the-land and high-level view of the site and its context. Fair warning, professor Lipschits talks extremely fast.

[Lipschits]

So you can connect here a tradition going all the way from the 3rd millennium and going all the way to the biblical period. From the late bronze period, we found here figurines of a woman giving birth. At the same time they have two babies suckling. Very nice and detailed figurine. And we have this figurine we found some of them here, and only in sites near Azekah.

This is a goddess, a fertility goddess. And it's not by accident that the main valley just below Azekah, called Elah Valley, which is The Valley of the Goddess, and we have 2 sites around one of them a monastery and one of them an ancient cave called the twins cave. We can see the tradition that was here continued to exist in this region for hundreds and hundreds of years - going from the Canaanites to Judahites to later periods. Many of the Judahite traditions started here: the pottery. So you can see how Judah and the Philistines lived together and interacted with each other.

[VO]

I'm not sure if you caught that, but what Oded just said is pretty important. The basic premise is this: the story arc found in the Bible is perhaps incomplete. Sites like Azekah are adding context to the broad strokes of scripture, because they show a far greater degree of interaction between cultures. Avi explains this a little better than I can.

[Winitzer]

The easiest example is that the Old Testament gives you a picture of Israel as monotheists who get it wrong, so the prophets rant and rave, but the message was clear at Sinai, right? 'This is your god, when you take the land you'll have it and if you're good everything will work out.'

There's a picture of monotheism, you know there are pockets of Canaanites and whatnot, but there's monotheism and then there's also a narrative of Israel that comes as a group from Sinai out of Egypt, around Jordan and comes in. That's external idea: Israel is an external nation that comes in and takes the land.

The archaeology is basically 180 degrees opposite. What that means is you see continuity from the local cultures that pre-existed that story, if you will, in other words if you go from Canaanites, well they became the Israelites. The Israelites were an internal development from these people.

[VO]

The work at Azekah can be intense. The days begin early to minimize the exposure to the Israeli sun. The tasks include a fair amount of digging, brushing, picking, sifting and clearing. The workers are students and scholars from all over the world, many of them learning archaeology on the fly from supervisors on-site. They'll occasionally form bucket brigades to clear large amounts of dirt from one of the deeper levels of the dig zones. Which are really cool to watch.

But here's the thing...despite the fairly intense labor, everyone genuinely looks to be having fun. Maybe it's fitting that one of the things Azekah is teaching us is that there is a far greater degree of intermingling among cultures than we might have guessed long ago. Because here, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Russians, Israelis, Americans, Germans...they're all represented. And there's a connection forming. Sometimes...across old battle lines.

[Lipschits]

So she could trace her lineage back here? Yes! She could trace her line back to the Assyrians, and the Assyrians were here destroying everything. So I said to her, your forefathers are destroying my forefathers' place! But we are going to find it together, excavate together in some place.

In Azekah, archaeology is very important. But the most important thing is the people. I mean it. You know, this is an excavation the students are getting and staff are getting, the best conditions...but, the main idea here is that the people are first. It's about learning, of course, but people, being

together...you'll see this at breakfast. This is the best breakfast at an archaeological site...in the world. And I know what I'm saying.

[VO]

I should point out here that I've not been to a lot of archaeological sites. But I'm inclined to take Oded at his word about this breakfast. The workers gather together for announcements about what's on tap for the rest of the day. The promise of bone washing is always a crowd pleaser. And then they feast on some regional favorites. We weren't inclined to join them, but then Oded insisted. Well, when in Azekah...

We had shakshouka, an impossibly delicious dish made of eggs poached in a tomato sauce with garlic and herbs. There were no leftovers.

You know how sometimes you tell a story not to relay information, or not to entertain, but almost to confirm to yourself that something really happened?

Well, that's the reason we're including this next part.

So we were about to interview one of our students, when a man came bursting onto the scene in a makeshift biblical character costume. We're talking fake beard, tunic, headdress. He started talking to a family visiting the site, play-acting as if he was King David. And that's when we saw where this was going. Because a short time later, here came the oldest son of the family...dressed as, you guessed it...Goliath.

[Nat: I challenge you to a one-on-one!]

[Do you think I could take five stones...?]

The stones were tennis balls, but the sling was real. Turns out the family put him up to this to show how David's sling would've worked. By the way, that weapon, the sling...pretty dangerous stuff. Armies during that time would have slingers, like archers or other specialized units.

Anyway, back to the show. David (airquotes) is winding up.

[In the name of the Lord!]

Anyway. Guess you had to be there.

When we finally were able to interview our student, Kacie Klamm, she told us about how being in-country is shaping her experience.

"Anyone who comes to Israel and sees the sites can understand why this place inspired the literature that's been so important to our traditions. But when you're here, digging in the dirt, you can imagine the real people who the events that we read about occurred to, and I don't think you can get it just by looking at the topsoil and looking at the pictures."

"We've had great leaders who've been very patient with us, showing us the basics," Klamm continued. "Anyone can fill a bucket with dirt, so not everything requires a ton of technical skill. But we have been able to get down in there, and deal with things that could be the subject of books and give us a ton of information, so even as beginners we've gotten to do some really cool things."

[Winitzer]

They are learning about the land and the historical reality, the geographical realities, the economic realities, the political realities that the stories...the stories, you can read them, but they're just not possible to understand in 3 dimensions, as it were, like one can do here.

This is really a unique opportunity for students who understandably approach things from a theological point of view, to challenge themselves to synthesize historical and frankly very scientific approaches to knowledge.

Just to the north of Tantur about 2 kilometers is an ancient site called (...) that was excavated by the team leading this dig up until 2012. In the midst of the archaeological excavation they found pollen residue that they took to the labs and found 2 new species that were not believed to have gotten to this land until late Roman times or thereafter - including the walnut.

I make this as a point because there's an attestation in the Song of Songs that mentions the word walnut except that it has always been translated differently because we thought when it was written there were no walnuts here. So these guys find evidence that we have walnuts in the 6th century BC, and the biblical text now changes. There are dozens of examples like this, where science can become an enhanced way of understanding theology.

[VO]

Azekah was not the only site of interest for Winitzer and the students. They also focused on the land at the University of Notre Dame at Tantur. As you heard in the first episode of this series, the land Notre Dame leases from the Vatican is located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It's along Hebron Road, which

is built on top of the ancient road that connected the two cities. And if your mind is already going there, let me finish your thought: Yes, that means per the biblical account, Mary and Joseph would have walked by this spot on their way into Bethlehem.

If you stand on top of the roof at Tantar, you get a sense for just how important this place was, and is. If you look to the south, you look down into Bethlehem. In the distance is the Herodium, King Herod's fortress and tomb. It dominates the skyline despite being about 10 kilometers away.

If you draw a straight line between where you are at Tantar and the Herodium, it would bisect the shepherd's fields, where tradition says the angels appeared to the shepherd's to announce Christ's birth.

Closer still is Rachel's tomb. The bible says she died giving birth to Benjamin, who went on to father a tribe of Israel. At least one scholar believes that happened at Tantar, and mourners carried her body down the hill to its final resting place.

To the North is the ruins of the Church of the Seat of Mary, or Kathisma. This is a spot venerated as the place a very pregnant Mary rested on her way into Bethlehem. The Old City is a 15-minute bus ride away.

So all that to say, it's reasonable to assume this spot played a major role at least in the early Christian era, and very likely before.

Yet there had never been an official archaeological survey of the area until 2019, when Winitzer and his students arrived. They worked with the Israel Antiquities Authority and Oded from Tel Aviv University, to get a look at what lies beneath.

We caught up with Professor Winitzer after his return, to find out what kinds of finds the students uncovered, both at Azekah and at Tantar.

First, we asked about Azekah.

[Winitzer]

A couple of finds came from my site; one was a figuring of a bull that came out fo the ground and this is clearly a reference to the god Baal. [3.02] Of course the prophets rant and rave about these things and here they come out of the ground, and you see that. If this is a nice Judean town then certainly it's not monotheistic in any way shape or form yet.

[VO]

But much of Azekah's history is known. At least the broad strokes of it. What is less known is what was at the University of Notre Dame at Tantur. And on that, even with an initial survey, Winitzer said the big pieces are starting to take shape.

Tantur literally abuts the road that runs between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The road is called the Way of Hebron. It is the ancient thoroughfare connecting the two cities from the pre-biblical period until after the biblical period, into the Christian period.

In the Christian period this was a road that was traversed by pilgrims walking from Jerusalem to Bethlehem or the other way around. We have evidence of settlement and of churches and administrative buildings that suggest this was a busy highway for the early Christian community.

The area was central in the state of Judah of the Davidic kings. We're talking about a few kilometers south of Jerusalem. And in fact in the archaeological survey that was done there this past summer with our students we found evidence from the iron age, including remains of pottery of specific jars that are well-attested from many many other sites that date to the 8th century (BC), to the period of Hezekiah.

This would've been well within the limits of the Judean kingdom in the pre-exilic period. In the period of the First Temple.

As you move forward this would've been part of the Judean state in the post-exilic period and when you get to the Hellenistic and Roman periods, this is an area that bears significance.

It is my strong hope that interest will generate and promote excavation - again it would be something that will be collaborative with Tel Aviv, but with students coming and unearthing what is there and hopefully working towards an understanding of what - among other things - is what I'm referring to as the sacred geography of the land.

[VO]

Oh, and one more thing. There was a mosaic found on the premises. The kind installed on the floor in the early Christian period. The thinking is this may have been the remnants of a Byzantine church, perhaps a Kathisma church...like the one a kilometer away.

So we know what Tantur...was. Remember in episode 1, we charted its history back to the Crusades, when it came into the possession of the Knights of Malta. Winitzer's project is giving

us clues from much earlier, and it's starting to look like Tantar played a very important role from very early on.

But what about its role, today?

[VO]

Next time on Tantar: Hill in the Holy Land

[McManus]

We just left Tantar and we're walking from there to Bethlehem...we're walking along this security wall...

[VO]

We join Notre Dame students as they experience the Holy Land

[Pines]

Jerusalem feels so mythical to me

[NAT: Bar Mitzvah]

We just left the western wall, it's the most holy site a Jew can pray

[VO]

And after visiting some of the holiest sites in the world, it's clear this is about so much more just a pilgrimage.

[NAT: Call to Prayer]

We were not prepared for that. Super intense.

It's hard to interpret...it's really hard to interpret..

[VO]

That's next time on Tantar, Hill in the Holy Land.

Tantar: Hill in the Holy land is produced by the Office of Public Affairs and Communications. It's hosted by me, Andy Fuller, with editing help from Olivia Rotolo. Our music is by David Tran.