

IRON AGE POTTERY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT ISRAEL

A. Wendell Bowes

Ancient pottery is one of the most reliable artifacts that archaeologists use to date ancient sites. There are two reasons for this:

(1) Pottery is one of the few artifacts from ancient times that has survived to the present. Once a piece of pottery has been fired, it is almost indestructible.

(2) Pottery styles changed over time. These changes can be dated fairly accurately, so a skilled archaeologist can easily use pieces of pottery to date the various levels of a site. Thus, a piece of pottery is like a time capsule to an archaeologist.

In addition, changes in pottery reveal a number of important aspects about a culture, such as its social structure, its level of technology, its contact with the outside world through trade, its food system, its artistic interests, and its religious traditions. So pottery analysis is a key element in learning about ancient societies.

The assemblage of pottery in this display is a collection from the Iron II period (1,000-587 BC). The items are authentic and were all purchased in Jerusalem. Their point of origin is Jerusalem, Hebron, or Samaria.

The Iron Age was the period when the Israelites of the Old Testament occupied Palestine. King David began to rule about 1,000 BC, King Ahab about 869 BC, King Hezekiah about 715 BC, and King Josiah about 640 BC. So these pieces of pottery are typical of Israelite culture from that period. They help us understand the everyday life of an average Israelite family. Included are bowls, lamps, juglets, jars, and even a chalice and a spouted beer strainer.

In addition to these small pieces of pottery, the average family also owned a number of larger vessels, including kraters and cooking pots about 10-12 inches high and storage jars about 2-3 feet high. These large storage jars that could hold several bushels were used to store the family's produce, such as wheat, barley, broad beans, chickpeas, grapes, lentils, and green beans. Other jars contained olive oil and water. The family probably secured these products by growing some of them on their farm land and trading for others with their neighbors. It is estimated that a family would need 8-10 of these storage jars for each person in the household in order to store all of the food they would need for a year.

Israelite potters were not known for their artistic designs. Most of their pottery was plain colored and utilitarian in style. Very few pieces were painted. This is in marked contrast to their next door neighbors, the Philistines, who produced pottery with painted geometric designs and images of birds and animals. The two cultures of Israel and Philistia can be easily distinguished in an archaeological dig by their respective pottery.

The one piece of pottery in this collection that is painted with red and black bands shows the influence of Cypro-Phoenician potters. It may well have been imported from Phoenicia.