

The Pottery of the Old Testament

by FRANCES W. JAMES

From the moment when man is created of dust in the second chapter of Genesis to the moment, shortly before Judah is led off to exile in Babylon, that God orders the prophet Jeremiah to shatter an earthen bottle in symbol of this destiny, the Bible has a curious interest in pottery and the potter's craft. Time after time, its metaphors compare man in the hands of God to clay in the hands of the potter. This Biblical interest in pottery has an unexpected reflection in Biblical archaeology: while masses of pottery are found on every excavation in the Holy Land, few objects of other categories occur.

By a strange paradox, the tiny land of Israel, which has given us the resounding passages of the Scriptures, and is in the area from which the alphabet comes, yields almost no written documents to suggest a date for the objects and buildings found. A century of intensive exploration has produced as exceptions to this epigraphic scarcity no more pre-classical documents than a very few stone-cut inscriptions, a few clay tablets and ostraca, and an occasional inscribed seal. This is not because the Israelites, or the Canaanites before them, could not write, but because they most often did so on papyrus; this survives in the exceedingly dry atmosphere of Egypt, but crumbles to dust in the relative dampness of Palestine.

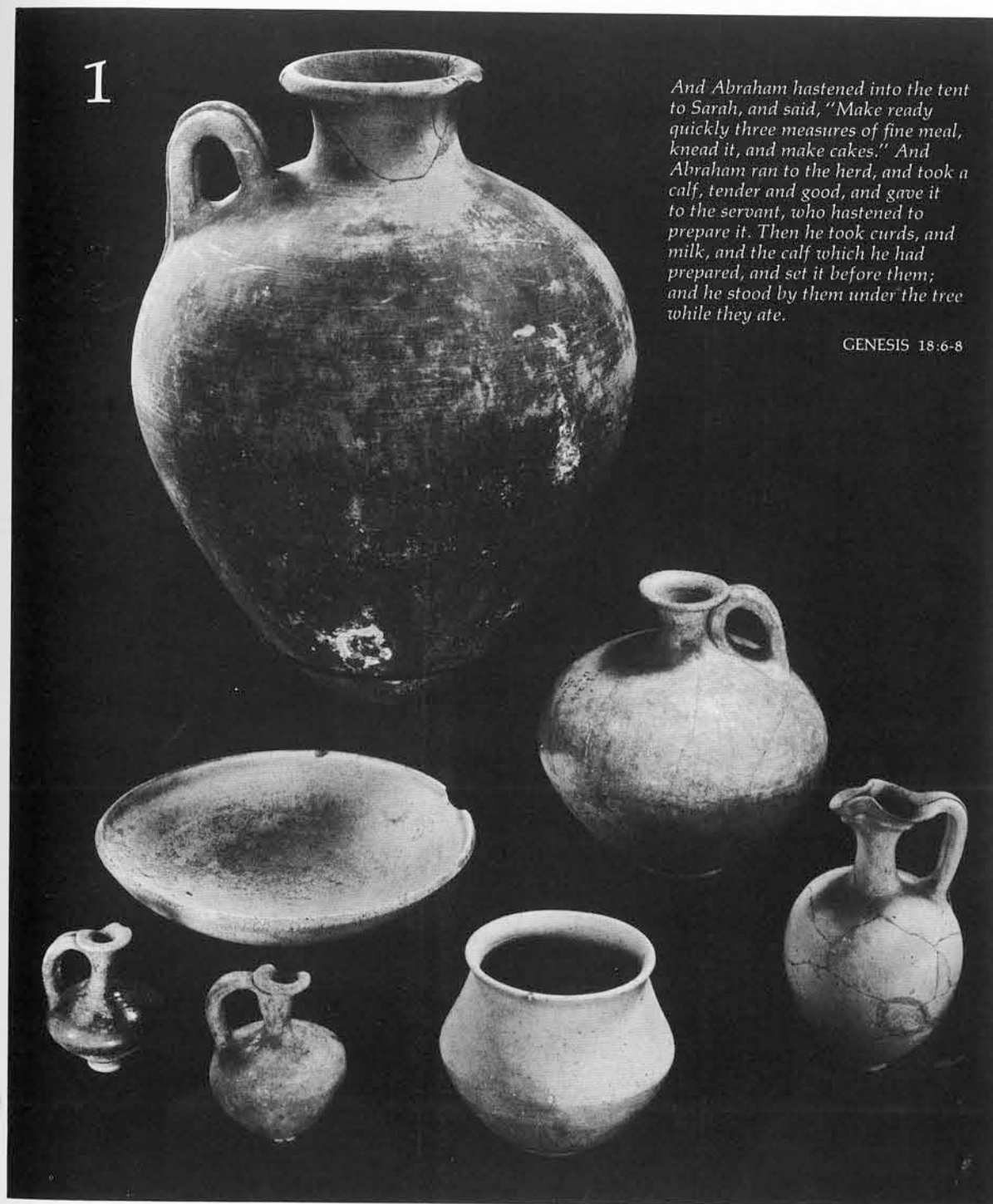
Therefore, it is from the omnipresent potsherd that the Palestinian archaeologist must somehow work out a system of chronology which will enable him to date the buildings he finds, and, with the buildings, their builders and the historical context. This is not an altogether adverse circumstance, as once a pot is broken the sherds or fragments are virtually indestructible since organic action does not affect them. Also, while the shattering of Jeremiah's earthen bottle all too truly symbolizes the brief life of any earthen vessel, pottery is for this reason all the more useful in determining a critical time scale.

The very earliest archaeologists were almost exclusively interested in written records and *objets d'art*; pottery is treated in their reports at best as an irrelevant curio. Its value as a chron-

ological criterion was first recognized in the 1880's. Then it was that the Egyptologist, Sir Flinders Petrie, realized that almost any sort of pottery, no matter how undistinguished, could be dated through its association with dated objects in closed finds such as tombs. He further saw that the date so established for the pottery could then be transferred to any other objects with which this sort of pottery occurred. In 1890, he excavated Tell el-Hesi, in southern Judaea, for the Palestine Exploration Fund and from the pottery was able to date each of a number of different cities piled on top of one another, whose gradual accumulation had built up the mound or tell. Since Petrie's time, Palestinian archaeologists have constantly been refining the ceramic chronology inaugurated at Tell el-Hesi, though there are still points on which we have insufficient information, or on which there is no general agreement, as, for example, the pottery in use during the united monarchy.

Even on the rare occasions when documents of the pre-classical period are forthcoming in the Holy Land, they are likely to be written on pottery! Ostraca—sherds with notes scratched or inked upon them—were the memorandum pads of ancient Israel. Some scholars believe that the oracles of the prophets were first jotted down on ostraca and later compiled into books. Ostraca have been found which record the tax receipts of Jeroboam II of Israel, noting a shipment of gold of Ophir not long before the Assyrian invasion; others contain the dramatic messages sent by one military commander to another during the last days of Judah.

Hence, the pottery shown here has a two-fold interest. First, the unbroken vessels suggest ones which *might* have figured in certain Bible episodes. It cannot be emphasized too strongly, however, that no one can say beyond doubt that a particular vessel is meant in any one text. We can picture only what seem to be suitable forms of the right period. Second, the sherds in their legions are the key to the giant jigsaw of archaeological remains which is gradually building up the exciting picture of life in Bible times.



And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

GENESIS 18:6-8

If a civilization continues without great interruption, its pottery will change almost imperceptibly and forms current in one century, even in one millennium, often continue on into the next; even so, the gradual changes are likely to add up to great differences between the first and last of a series, as in the cooking pots shown here. Thus, many vessels of the Old Testament owe their inspiration to pot-

tery which first appeared during the Middle Bronze Age, between about 2000 and 1600 B.C., when Palestine was still the land of Canaan. Since this is the time at which the nomadic Patriarchs were wandering about the hill country, Middle Bronze vessels such as (1) and (2), purchased at potters' shops in the gateways of the great Canaanite cities, may have figured in Biblical episodes.

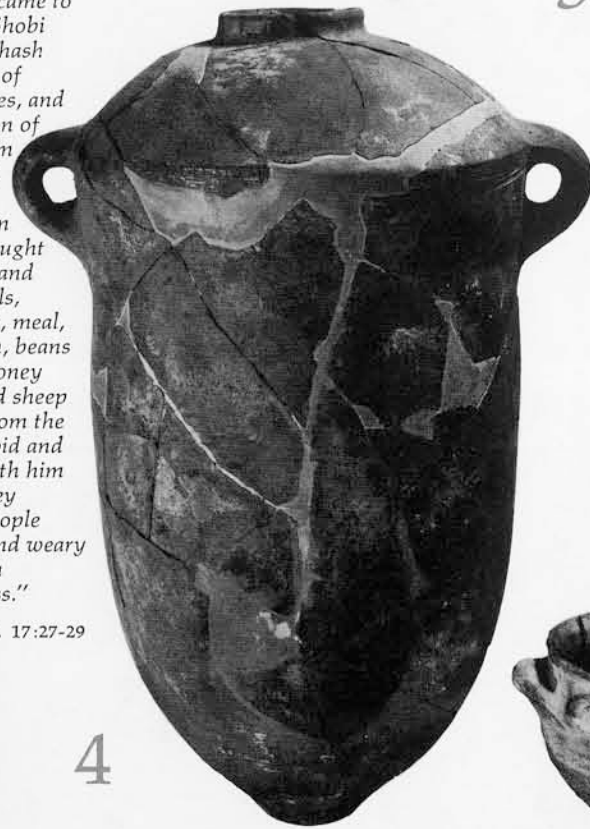


Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!"
GENESIS 25:29-30



And David said, "As the Lord lives, the Lord will smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed; but take now the spear that is at his head, and the jar of water, and let us go."
1 SAMUEL 26:10-11

When David came to Mahana'im, Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Machir the son of Am'mi-el from Lo'debar, and Barzil'lai the Gileadite from Ro'gelim, brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat; for they said, "The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness."
2 SAMUEL 17:27-29



And his father went down to the woman, and Samson made a feast there; for so the young men used to do.
JUDGES 14:10

JUDGES 14:10



5



6

And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samar'ia, and the plummet of the house of Ahab; and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.
2 KINGS 21:13

2 KINGS 21:13



7

And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sephar-va'im, and placed them in the cities of Samar'ia instead of the people of Israel; and they took possession of Samar'ia, and dwelt in its cities.
2 KINGS 17:24

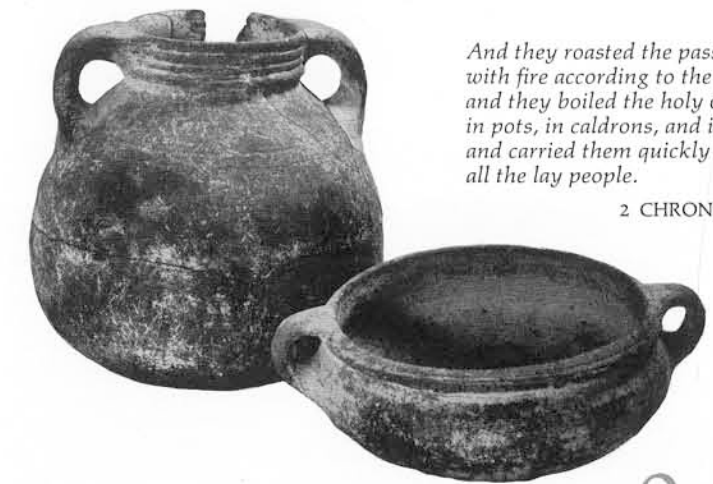
2 KINGS 17:24



8

On the day after the murder of Gedali'ah, before any one knew of it, eighty men arrived from Shechem and Shiloh and Samar'ia, with their beards shaved and their clothes torn, and their bodies gashed, bringing cereal offerings and incense to present at the temple of the Lord.
JEREMIAH 41:4

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9

And they roasted the passover lamb with fire according to the ordinance; and they boiled the holy offerings in pots, in caldrons, and in pans, and carried them quickly to all the lay people.
2 CHRONICLES 35:13

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Forms as (3) the flask and (4) the storage jar, used first during the Late Bronze Age (about 1600-1200 B.C.) continue into the period of the Judges (about 1200-1000 B.C.) or the united kingdom (about 1000-922 B.C.) when many were adopted by the Israelites who, as nomads, seem to have brought no distinctive pottery with them from Egypt. The advent of the Philistines about the same time, however, is marked by the sudden introduction in

the area of the Pentapolis of vessels of entirely new shapes and forms of decoration (5). By the time of the divided kingdom (922-722), however, the Philistine pottery had completely disappeared.

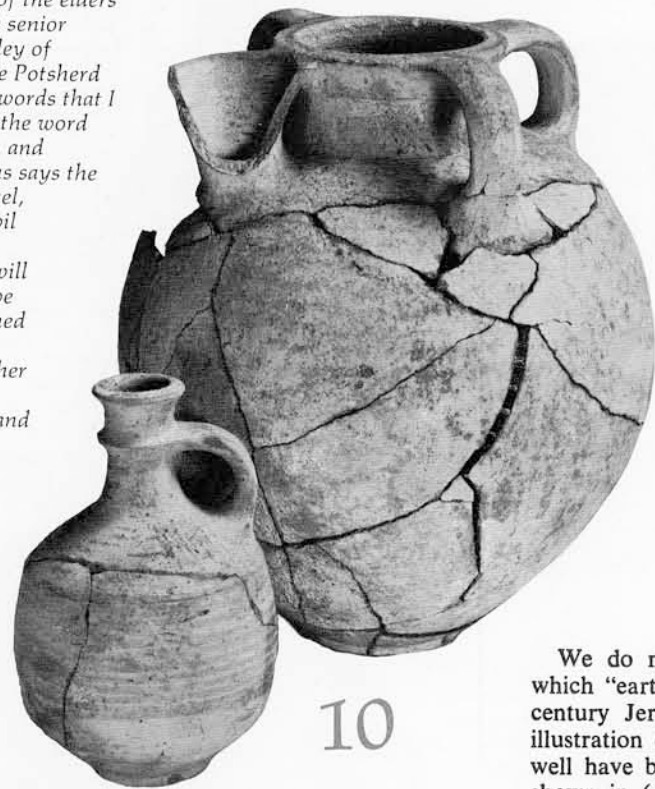
The Israelites' most conspicuous contribution to the ceramic repertoire of Palestine is the technique of pebble burnishing over a red haematite slip, as seen in the plate (6). The development of this technique in itself yields clues to dating. About 700

B.C., a strikingly different kind of pottery once again appears—this time it is the "palace ware" of Sargon's Assyrian governors; it provides striking archaeological evidence of the invasion described in the books of Kings and Chronicles. First identified in Palestine by Petrie, its prototype has recently been found by Mallowan at Sargon's palace in Assyria itself. In (7), the sherd to the left is from Palestine, that to the right its Assyrian prototype.

Both before and after this conquest, Israelite potters were making vessels such as the holemouth jar (8) and the cooking pots (9). Both of the latter are descended by a series of infinitely gradual changes from the Canaanite pot in (2). The holemouth jars might have held grain brought to Mizpah by the men of Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria; while both cooking pots might have figured at Josiah's passover.

Thus said the Lord, "Go, buy a potter's earthen flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, and go out to the Valley of Benhinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. You shall say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such evil upon this place that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by burning incense in it to other gods whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents...'
Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended...'"

JEREMIAH 19:1-11



10

We do not, of course, know exactly which "earthen bottle" of the early sixth century Jeremiah shattered in dramatic illustration of his prophecy, but it could well have been the small water decanter shown in (10). Fragments of such jugs occur in the debris of cities destroyed by the Babylonians—the event in which Jeremiah saw the punishment of Israel's evil ways. Sherds of a false-spouted oil jar (10) are often found with those of the decanter. The false spout of the oil jar probably served to hold the juglet with which the oil was dipped.

Even after the remnant returned from the Exile, some of the old Israelite pottery goes on, greatly changed, as seen in the storage jar (11), which has points in common with the tenth century vessel in (4). By the time of Alexander's conquest in 330 B.C., however, nearly all the old forms have disappeared and new types, often influenced by classical models, are appearing. These become the pottery of the New Testament and, in their turn, go on with gradual changes for a long time before they too are superseded by newer fashion.

Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemi'ah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedai'ah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattani'ah, for they were counted faithful; and their duty was to distribute to their brethren.

NEHEMIAH 13:12-13



11

THE POTTERY ILLUSTRATED IN (1)-(6), (8)-(10), AND (14) IS FROM THE BETH SHAN AND AIN SHEMS COLLECTIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM; (7) AND (11) ARE IN THE LONDON UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY; (12) IS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTIQUITIES MUSEUM, STATE OF ISRAEL; (13) IN THE PALESTINE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, JORDAN; (15) IN THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO. THE QUOTATIONS ARE ACCORDING TO THE REVISED STANDARD VERSION OF THE BIBLE.

—EDITOR



12



13

Most documents from pre-classical Palestine known to date are scratched, stamped, or inked upon pottery. The ostrakon (12) discovered by Israeli archaeologists at Tell Qasile, near Jaffa, notes the shipment of thirty shekels of gold of Ophir to Beth Horon; it dates perhaps to the eighth century B. C. The ostrakon (13) is one of a series of letters from one Judaeen commanding officer to another during the siege of Nebuchadnezzar in 589 B.C. found in British excavations at Tell ed-Duweir, most probably the site of ancient Lachish.

Stamped handles from large storage jars are the nearest things yet known to the personal property of any Israelite king. Reading "Royal property," together with the name of a town, the stamp may represent the royal seal; certainly the jars seem to suggest that the passage in 1 Chronicles 4:23 refers to a government pottery. The design on the jar handle shown (14) represents a four-winged scarab. Jars of this sort occur from the time of Hezekiah through the reign of Josiah; opinion differs as to whether they were used for the collection of grain for taxes, or as a government-guaranteed standard of measure.



14

"Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! Does the clay say to him who fashions it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles?'"

ISAIAH 45:9



15

Palestine is unfortunately as devoid of pictorial representations as it is of the written word. Although many early potter's wheels, including a magnificent specimen from Ain Shems, the Biblical Beth Shemesh, have been found in the Holy Land, their use can be shown only by drawing on illustrative material from other countries. This funerary model of a potter at work (15) is from an Egyptian tomb of about 2500 B.C.

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