

This month (July/80) the Chappaqua Public Library is exhibiting some biblical artifacts I've collected over my decades of teaching the Bible and biblical theology to laity, clergy, and seminarians. Here is some of the text accompanying the items of the three types of material:

A--SCULPTURE. This "ushabti" (in Ancient Egyptian, "servant" of the Pharaoh) is, by certification of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, older than the oldest pyramid. It antedates Abraham by almost one millenium, Moses by almost two millenia, Jesus by almost three millenia, and us by almost five millenia. No more ancient bronze has been discovered. Found in a Pharonic tomb, it depicts the dead Pharaoh as assuming the guise and role of Osiris, "the sovereign father of all the gods" (Apuleius). The headdress, converging the royal symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt, was created at about the time of the casting, when Pharaoh Menes united Egypt (ca. 3,000 BC). The shepherd's crook symbolizes power and guidance; the flail may refer to both prosperity (flailing grain) and punishment (beating prisoners and slaves).The early Egyptian Christians took this image at three levels: oppression (of which Pharaoh is the Bible's personal symbol), deliverance (Osiris' wife Isis, by loyal love, effecting Osiris' resurrection), and Jesus (who, as Lord of the living, combines justice and love here and now, whereas in the pagan cults Osiris did so only as god of the underworld, in the hereafter.

B--COINAGE. The five sheets of coins cover the coins of the Bible, of the Roman Empire, and of later Bible-lands periods. During most of the biblical period, metal exchange was by weights rather than by minted coins. (The text on these sheets was written by Willis Elliott in 1958.)

C--POTTERY. In the past half century, four new means of dating archeological and paleological finds have been devised. Earliest of these was pottery dating, by biblical scholar G. Ernest Wright. The pieces in this cabinet are from Late-Jewish/Early-Christian times.

C.1--This is from the dig at Dothan, where the prototypic Jewish prophet Elijah, in the 9th century BC, caused the cruse of oil "to fail not." Here, from the first century AD, is a cruse of oil and a lamp--Jesus alluding to both in the Parable of the Wise/Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25.1-13; Luke 12.35-38). Note the elegant, simple, no-nonsense and no-symbolism design of these small-town artifacts--everyday ware in the Palestine of Jesus. (Because of the extreme delicacy of the cruse, it is a far rarer piece than is the lamp: such a cruse of the period is seldom found undamaged.)

C.2--This is an urban Roman lamp in the playful form of a bird. Carry your light by the bird's tail! For the time and place, the fletching is highly skilled. Of all the first-century-AD Palestinian lamps Dr. Elliott knows of, this is the only one to represent the "tick-tack-toe" game on Jerusalem's Lithostratum, the pavement between the cells of the prison where Jesus was the night before his crucifixion. Guides often point to this spot as the one near-certain place "where Jesus walked." The game was for guards to while away the hours between "punching the time clock."....The carbon found on the smaller orifices of these lamps has been added to by Dr. Elliott's lighting of them in teaching; the wicks can be seen. He matches the ancient thin olive oil by using 2 parts of vegetable oil and 1 part of kerosene; other proportions cause the lamps to go out or burn too fast.

C.3--This later Christian but pre-modern lamp is crude in comparison with the other two lamps here. Of the three, only this one is explicitly Christian: between the well and the burning orifice is a "Maltese" cross, almost certainly more than decorative.