POTTERY AS A BIBLICAL MOTIF

Wearing the Word

Rise of Persia in Biblical History
Curiosity gives evidence of a hungry mind, don’t you think? Curiosity led Johannes Gutenberg to look for a better way to print books. In 1454, he developed a printing press with movable type. Thomas Savery, an English engineer, wanted to harness the power of steam under pressure. In 1698, he patented the steam engine, which helped fuel the industrial revolution. For over a decade, Benjamin Franklin had an interest in electricity. So in 1752 he flew a kite during a thunderstorm. Fueled by curiosity, these men, with their inventions and discoveries, helped make the world a better place.

Born in 1802 in Turin, Italy, but raised in France, Paul-Emile Botta had planned to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a doctor. His father, Carl Botta, though, had another interest—a passion for history. Evidently this passion was contagious. As a young man, Paul-Emile decided against pursuing medicine and became intent on finding what he called “the lost cities of Assyria,” locations mentioned only in Scripture and a few ancient texts. Specifically, he wanted to find Nineveh.

Botta began digging at Kuyunjik, a village near the Tigris in present-day Iraq. The dig seasons were disappointing. One of the workers, though, told that he had found an ancient carving of a horse and rider when doing some digging at his house in a nearby village. Botta moved his team. Almost immediately, the workers began to unearth massive artifacts and ruins. Botta sent home a three-word cable: “Nineveh is found.” Unable to read cuneiform, though, Botta did not realize he was not at Nineveh. Instead, he was excavating the eighth-century palace of King Sargon II at Khorsabad, one of the captial cities of ancient Assyria. Artifacts from Khorsabad were eventually shipped to the Louvre and the British Museum, where they remain still on display.

What if Botta had not been curious? What if he hadn’t had that sense of adventure? I believe Biblical Illustrator readers want to know more, to dig deeper, to satisfy their thirst for biblical knowledge. Our hope is that the articles in Biblical Illustrator help satisfy your curiosity and will help strengthen your faith.

Interestingly, if Botta had continued excavations at Kuyunjik, he would have discovered Nineveh. The ruins were just a few feet below where Botta had ceased his work.

Happy digging!

Archived Biblical Illustrator articles can help as you prepare for January Bible Study. For a list of useful titles, go to lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.
A Handbook on the Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith

Many Christians recognize that Jesus was Jewish. But, how does Jesus’ Jewishness impact believers’ understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith? In order to address this question, Craig Evans (Houston Baptist University) and David Mishkin (Israel College of the Bible) have gathered fifty-two essays from twenty-four authors into a concise primer on the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. Knowledge of the Old Testament roots of Christianity can greatly enhance the believer’s faith and trust in the gospel. Jesus Himself explained how the Old Testament foretold His death, burial, and resurrection (Luke 24:25-27,44-49).

Craig and Mishkin organized the book in four parts, using the imagery of a tree. First, “the soil” recognizes the importance of the Old Testament, the Bible of Jesus. Topics addressed in this section include Old Testament teachings on Israel, the nations, messianic prophecies, festivals, and the temple. The second section, “the roots,” concentrates on Jesus’ Jewishness, primarily His world, His life, and His teachings. The third part, “the trunk,” examines the Jewishness of the disciples and Paul, together with the Jewish message of resurrection. The final part, “the branches,” describes the separation of Judaism and Christianity in the Early Church period and in the Middle Ages. An important part of this last section offers hope for a mending of the ways, specifically in the interaction of Jewish and Arab believers in Jesus in modern Israel.

The book is written on a scholarly level, but it does make accessible several relevant topics that will be useful for a pastor and general students in Bible study groups. The many excellent articles in the book make it difficult to single out one or two as being the best. In continuing the tree imagery of the work, my hope is that the impact of the topics in Evans and Mishkin’s book would cause the gospel witness of the individual Christian, and the church, to flourish like a majestic cedar (Ps. 92:12)!

Stephen J. Andrews is professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri.

On a scale of 1-10, this book receives a rating of 9.5 camels.


Book reviews are limited to those the Illustrator staff feels confident to recommend, based on ease of reading, quality of content, and doctrinal viewpoint. Each book is reviewed within LifeWay’s doctrinal guidelines. The 1 to 10 scale reflects overall quality and usefulness.
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POTTERY

AS A BIBLICAL MOTIF

BY TIMOTHY T. FABER
If Paul were writing to the Corinthians today he might say, “We have this treasure in margarine tubs.” Doing so would contrast the tubs’ expendable and inferior nature and the treasure’s incomparable value. Because he lived in a world without plastic, though, Paul expressed the truth using a metaphor to which the ancient Corinthians could relate—earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). Paul explained to the people of Corinth that believers hold the treasure of the gospel in our flawed bodies, which he likened to pottery. Paul’s mentioning earthen vessels, or pottery, was something everyone in ancient times would have understood. Because pottery was such a pervasive part of life, other biblical writers such as Job, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and John also used it as a motif to convey their messages.

Available
As a readily available resource, clay was inexpensive; as a raw resource, it was free. Even a child could pick up some clay and make a simple item of some sort. Clay, a pliable material, can be formed into nearly any shape the mind can imagine. As early as 4000 BC, and perhaps earlier, people were using clay for basic pottery. Over the years people used clay for making bricks, jewelry, lamps, and molds for casting metal. They used it for making figurines, idols, and cylinder seals; they also formed it into tablets on which they wrote memorials, legal documents, and receipts. Thus value was added to the clay by the intentional work of the hand.

Versatile
Writing to Christians in Rome, Paul highlighted the concept of value being added. He explained that the potter is superior to and has total sovereignty over the vessels he makes and that some of the vessels are made for honorable uses and some for dishonorable (Rom. 9:20b-21). The value is not in the clay but in the purpose for which the worker molded it. Paul’s analogy likely reminded the reader of God creating man from the dust of the ground and of man returning to dust at death, because of sin. Indeed man was just dust (not even a “lump” of clay) until God formed him and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.¹

In biblical times, the value of an earthen vessel was determined both by what it was and what it held. This was the point Paul was making to the Corinthians. When he wrote, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7),² Paul was highlighting the treasure, not the believers who possessed the treasure. In fact, the gospel, or as Paul described it, “the dying of Jesus” and “the life of Jesus” (v. 10) is made more glorious by the fact that it is embodied in the earthly vessels of flesh. Like Paul, each believer should understand himself or herself “to be a vessel that contains and conveys a message.”³ The value a Christ follower has is due in part to the message he or she possesses.

Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. Julius Caesar rebuilt and colonized Corinth in 44 BC primarily with a motley crew of former slaves from every ethnicity and nationality. These “freedmen” were obsessed with honor and recognition. Against this backdrop, Paul carefully articulated the glory of the gospel and the humble state of humanity. He followed John the Baptist’s motto: “He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30) rather than the Corinthian ideal of exalting oneself. To this end Paul drew from Jeremiah who clearly explained that God is greater than man or any nation of men.⁴

The availability, and versatility of clay, or earthenware, resulted in it being so much a part of everyday life in the ancient world that—much like plastic in today’s world—it had little significance in itself. It was the means to an end,
not an end in itself. Its value was in its ability to serve a greater purpose. The idea that broken pieces of pottery might one day be highly valued and placed in the finest museums would have seemed as absurd to them as plastic bags being considered priceless and placed in museums would seem to us today.

**Durable**

The versatility of pottery is matched by its durability. As a writing surface, it is more durable than other materials such as a papyrus. A clay jug will protect its contents better than a woven sack. A brick home can withstand the weather better than a wooden one. Perhaps this durability was what Paul had in mind when he wrote about being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down; but not crushed, despairing, forsaken, or destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8-9).

In spite of this durability, though, earthen vessels are also fragile. They may shatter when dropped or when rapidly experiencing extreme changes in temperature. Sometimes being fragile was a desired trait. A terra-cotta mold for instance, would be broken in order to release the metal object it held. Further, Old Testament law called for a defiled earthenware vessel or oven to be broken rather than washed. Wooden articles, clothing, skins, or sacks were to be washed; but desecrated earthenware pieces were to be shattered (Lev. 11:31-35).

Like pottery, people can be broken. During the time of Job’s testing, he wondered if God’s intent was to break him completely. He cried out, “Your hands fashioned and made me altogether, and would You destroy me? Remember now, that You have made me as clay; and would You turn me into dust again?” (Job 10:8-9). Unlike Job, the people of Isaiah’s day were going to be shattered because of their sin:

**Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, “Since you have rejected this word and have put your trust in oppression and guile, and have relied on them, therefore this iniquity will be to you like a breach about to fall, a bulge in a high wall, whose collapse comes suddenly in an instant, whose collapse is like the smashing of a potter’s jar, so ruthlessly shattered that a sherd will not be found among its pieces to take fire from a hearth or to scoop water from a cistern.”**

—Isaiah 30:12-14

Similarly, the Lord illustrated His ability to build up or destroy a nation. To convey His message, God instructed Jeremiah, “Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and
purifies himself from anything dishonorable, he will be a special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:21, CSB).

The earlier consideration of versatility focused on how the potter formed the clay. But here the vessel, meaning the believer, plays a significant role in its own usefulness as well—he “purifies himself from anything dishonorable.” The Greek word Paul used for “purify” means “to clean out thoroughly, to completely purge.” Paul was reminding Timothy that for a vessel to be useful, it must be clean. He then gave examples of those things a believer must remove from his life: youthful lusts, foolish speculations, and a quarrelsome spirit (vv. 22-24).

Paul’s mentioning earthen vessels in his letters is in keeping with other biblical writers’ using pottery as a motif to represent our relationship with God. They each used a common object to teach profound theological truths that guide our lives still today. Our value, as God’s vessels, comes from the hand of the potter. Ultimately, He molds us into that which is available, durable, and versatile—so that we might be “useful to the Master, prepared for every good work” (v. 21).

Useful

There is hope, though, for the defiled. Concerning the message to Jeremiah of God reworking the impure clay into another vessel, “We may discern in this feature of the analogy a positive message of hope indicating that God could begin to fashion his people Israel anew.”

Using the analogy of a large house to picture the church, Paul wrote to Timothy and spoke of it containing vessels made of gold, silver, wood, and clay. He indicated that the vessels made of wood and clay were dishonorable or impure. Paul, though, gave hope for such a vessel, “So if anyone

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB)
4. See Jer. 18.

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THE PROPHET MALACHI spoke to the hearts of a troubled people whose circumstances of insecurity, skepticism, and disappointments are similar to those God’s people often face today. The book contains a message that must not be overlooked by those who wish to encounter the Lord and His kingdom and to lead others to a similar encounter. Malachi offers to discouraged, disenchanted, and even bitter people the hope of faith that can only be in a God who hears and has acted on our behalf and will act for us when He comes for us “with healing in His wings.” 

BY E. RAY CLENDENEN

Malachi’s Life and Times

This is also the case with Obadiah, about whom nothing is known but his name, which means “servant of Yahweh.” Habakkuk’s identity is also a mystery; we know only that he lived during the time of the Chaldeans. Jewish tradition is split between those who affirmed “Malachi” as the prophet’s name and those who considered it another name for Ezra. We might ask, however, if Ezra wrote

His Identity

Some scholars believe the Book of Malachi is anonymous, that the term Malachi is just a title or pseudonym. They base this partly on the unusual nature of the name “Malachi,” which means “My messenger” (Hebrew malak can mean “messenger” or “angel”), which occurs with that meaning in Malachi 3:1. Why would parents name their son, “My messenger”? It may have been a shortened form of Malachiah, “messenger of Yahweh.” Similarly, the prophet Micah’s name is a shortened form of either Mikael (Michael), “who is like God?” or Mikayahu, “who is like Yahweh?” (1 Kings 22:8).

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the book, why would he hide his name from such a book of prophecy? The reference to “my messenger” in Malachi 3:1 may be a play on the prophet’s name, as “Who is a God like you?” is on the prophet Micah’s name (Mic. 7:18). The discovery of a jar handle in Arad, dating from the late monarchy, with the name Malachi on it shows that Malachi was actually a Hebrew name.

His Era
Although missing any direct historical references, Malachi contains some chronological clues: (1) Malachi’s placement with other postexilic books; (2) reference to a devastated Edom (1:3-4), which fell to Babylonian King Nabonidus in 551 BC; (3) existence of a temple (1:6-14; 2:3,4,11; 3:3,8-10), rebuilt in 515 BC; (4) the term pechah, “governor” (1:8), which had political connotations only in the postexilic period; (5) parallels between issues Malachi faced and those of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9–10; Neh. 5:12–13), who arrived in Judah in 458 and 445 BC; (6) Malachi’s lack of concern for the Sabbath, suggesting a time significantly earlier than Nehemiah (Neh. 9:14; 10:31; 13:15-22); (7) linguistic typology dating Malachi between 515 and 475 BC; and (8) Malachi’s context of financial insecurity, religious skepticism, and apathy, indicating a significant time after 515 BC. Thus, Malachi would fit in the reign of Darius I (521-486 BC) or Xerxes (486-465 BC).

His Situation
Other Persian-appointed governors were probably in charge between Zerubbabel and Nehemiah. Nehemiah responded with anger to the merciless exploitation of the poor by the Jewish “nobles and officials” (Neh. 5:6-7). He and his “associates” had not eaten “the food allotted to the governor,” although “the governors who preceded me had heavily burdened the people, taking from them food and wine as well as a pound of silver. Their subordinates also oppressed the people” (vv. 14-15, CSB). During the time between Darius’s death and

Left: A bronze leg that was part of a throne found near Samaria; dates to 6th–4th centuries BC. The legs, which are fashioned to represent a lion’s paws, resemble ones found on the royal thrones of the kings of Persia. They may have belonged to the throne of the governor of Samaria. Malachi 1:8 speaks of a pechah, translated “governor,” a term that had significance only during the post-exilic period.

Below: Partial remains of the Royal Palace at Persepolis, which is located in present-day Iran. The main entrance is the Gate of All Nations; in the background is the Apadana Palace. Darius began construction on the palace at Persepolis about 518 BC; construction, though, took more than a century. The Gate of All Nations was actually a grand hall measuring over 80 feet long. Once he came to the throne, Xerxes had his name carved on all of the main entrances to the hall. The palace complex included a military headquarters, housing for the royal family and visiting dignitaries, reception halls, and stables. Alexander the Great destroyed the city in about 331 BC. Malachi’s ministry likely occurred during the reign of either Darius or Xerxes.
Nehemiah’s governorship, the people of Judah lacked strong leadership and thus failed to obey national and religious laws. Persia turned out to be as oppressive an overlord as any the Jews had faced. In addition to enemy opposition and crop failure (Mal. 3:11), the people of Judah were under severe financial strain due to Persian taxation. Herodotus lists the annual taxes due from each of Darius’s twenty satrapies at an astounding 14,560 talents of silver, or around 400–500 tons. Ezra 4:13 mentions three different kinds of taxes people were paying in the time of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC). The impoverished people had to go in debt to buy food and also “to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards” (Neh. 5:3, CSB; see Ezra 6:8). Interest rates on loans went from about twenty percent in the time of Cyrus to forty or fifty percent by the end of the fifth century BC.

After Darius’s death, the people of Judah and other provinces would surely have been severely disheartened at the speed and ease with which his son Xerxes put down revolts, reestablished control, and clamped down on his empire. This could partially explain the spiritual and moral apathy that Malachi addressed.

His Message
Most of the people had lost faith, including the priests, who were just going through the motions, thus contributing to the people’s indifference to God. The people felt the Lord had not been faithful to care for His people, so they were selfishly taking care of themselves with no sense of responsibility or regard for one another (Mal. 3:14).

God used Malachi to remind them first of God’s faithful love (1:2–5; 3:6). The rest of his message stresses God’s loving and holy character, His unchanging and glorious purposes for His people, and their responsibilities to Him and to each other.

11. Fox, A Message from the Great King, 20.
Moses’ Final Appeal

Honor the Covenant

By R. Kelvin Moore

ETB: Deuteronomy 30:1-10,19-20
The Book of Deuteronomy records three sermons Moses preached on the plains of Moab. The book begins with the Israelites preparing to cross the Jordan River and conquer the promised land. Prior to that monumental event, Moses, nearing the end of his life, preached these sermons to remind the Hebrews of God’s mighty acts and to encourage them to be faithful to Him. Doubtless, Moses understood, while the promised land offered the Hebrews freedom and opportunities, it also posed tremendous challenges, temptations, and even threats. Some of these threats, the Philistines and Baalism for examples, jeopardized their very existence. Deuteronomy 34 records Moses’ death and burial. Deuteronomy constitutes, in essence, Moses’ Last Will and Testament. What would be Moses’ final message and final appeal?

Covenant

Within these three sermons, Moses reminded his hearers of the covenant between them and God. The Hebrews defined their relationship to God through covenants. A covenant is defined as, “a pact, treaty, alliance, or agreement between two parties of equal or unequal authority.” Thus a covenant could be established between parties of equal authority such as kings or between parties where one had authority greater than the other—such as a king and a vassal.

Genesis 6:8 records the first use of the Hebrew word translated “covenant” in the Old Testament. God commanded Noah to construct an ark in order to escape the pending mass destruction from a flood. God promised to save Noah, his family, and “all the living creatures” (Gen. 6:19). But, what would this escape mean for Noah and the earth if God did not also promise the possibility of a relationship with Him? God made Noah that promise in the form of a covenant: “I will establish my covenant with you” (v. 18). In the aftermath of the flood, God promised both His presence and that He would never again destroy the earth by water (9:9-17). God communicated these promises, clearly, in the form of a covenant. Genesis 9:9-17 uses the word “covenant” seven times. This word is also interspersed throughout the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy).

Message

Being a gifted preacher, Moses knew his hearers recognized and understood the covenant nomenclature. He, therefore, spoke in the vernacular. Heightening the significance of the covenant concept, Deuteronomy 30:19-20 records the final words of Moses’ final sermon.

Recorded in verses 11-16, Moses revealed the Word of the Lord:

This command that I give you today is certainly not too difficult or beyond your reach…. the message is very near you… I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity… I am commanding you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, statutes, and ordinances, so that you may live.

—Deuteronomy 30:11,14,15,16

Unfortunately, history reveals the Hebrews failed woefully in their attempt to be faithful to the Lord’s demands as read in covenant(s). Moses knew this all too well and communicated the Word of God additionally:

But if your heart turns away and you do not listen and you are led astray to bow in worship to

Overlooking the plains of Moab, facing west from atop Mount Nebo.

Above: This bronze and gold foil figure, likely El—the head of the Canaanite pantheon, dates to the 14th–13th centuries BC and was discovered in Israel. The Canaanites believed that figures such as this one could embody the essence and power of the god they represented.

As they were about to enter the land of Canaan, Moses warned God’s people not to be “led astray to bow in worship to other gods and serve them” (Deut. 30:17, CSB).

Left: Dated to the 15th–16th centuries BC, this Hittite covenant treaty was excavated at Bogazkoy, the capital of the ancient Hittite Kingdom.
other gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will certainly perish and will not prolong your days in the land you are entering to possess across the Jordan.
—Deuteronomy 30:17-18

One can almost hear the preacher/pastor Moses imploring his hearers to “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, love the LORD your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life” (vv. 19-20).

**Witnesses**
Accountability can be a powerful motivation. Moses informed and warned the Hebrews that God would hold them accountable to this covenant relationship and punish them if they failed to live up to their agreement. In order to provide accountability, God provided observers: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today” (v. 19).

Hebrew covenants did have parallels in the Old Testament world, especially in the Hittite and Assyrian Empires. A covenant party would choose a reliable witness who would not neglect or abandon their covenant responsibilities. In regards to witnesses in Deuteronomy 30, both the Hittites and Assyrians listed witnesses to their covenants, including their gods, heaven, earth, mountains, rivers, springs, seas, winds, and clouds.

What greater witnesses could God summon other than “heaven and earth”? Heaven constituted the limitless and earth constituted the tangible. Should the Hebrews fail in their covenant commitment to the Lord, they would be without excuse and condemned by undeniable witnesses.

God’s covenant did not end with the Old Testament period. Jeremiah prophesied of the coming of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). This covenant would be unlike “the covenant I made with their ancestors...I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jer. 31:32,33).

Christians have for centuries interpreted Jesus as the source of this new covenant. Moses’ final sermon to the Hebrews resonates in the contemporary: choose life!

1. See Deut. 1:5: “Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses began to explain this law, saying…” (CSB). For the sermons, see chapters 1-4, first sermon; 5-28, second sermon; and 29-30, third sermon.

2. The Hebrews had related to God through covenants for hundreds of years by the time Moses preached. For a foundational work on understanding covenants see George E. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Pittsburg: Presbyterian Board of Colportage of Western Pennsylvania, 1955).


4. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

5. Not an exhaustive list but see Gen. 15:18; 17:2,4,7,9,10,11,13,14,19,21; 31:44; Ex. 6:4; 19:5; 31:16; 34:10; Lev. 2:13; 24:8, 26:9; Num. 10:33; 14:44, 25:13; Deut. 4:13; 5:2; 8:16; 9:9; 17:2; 29:1,9,12,14,21,25; 31:9,16,20,25,26; 33:9.

6. For an additional reference to covenant witnesses see Deut. 4:26 and Isa. 1:2.


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