



## Board Games in Biblical Gath

Shira Albaz, Itzhaq Shai, Haskel J. Greenfield, Aren M. Maeir

PSYCHOLOGISTS CONFIRM THAT PLAY IS JUST as critical for adults as for kids—not only as simple, unproductive leisure, but also as a mental and social catalyst. Board games represent a unique kind of human play. Millions of board games are sold every year, as people from different walks of life, ages, races and ethnicities all enjoy the kind of brain-teasing and social engagement that board games offer. And archaeology demonstrates that this pastime has deep roots.

Board games are the earliest type of game uncovered from the Biblical world. Gaming boards and playing pieces made of durable materials, such as stones, pebbles, bones, sticks, twigs and animal turds, have been found in all kinds of archaeological settings, showing that board games enjoyed popularity among all social strata of ancient societies in Canaan.

From as early as the Neolithic period (8300–4500 B.C.E.), board games are attested from Canaan in both public and domestic contexts, including publicly accessible rocks, floors, benches and industrial areas, as well as private homes and yards. The public gaming boards are usually larger than those found in domestic settings.

The most common board game in Bronze Age Canaan was the Game of

**POPULARITY OF BOARD GAMES** in Bronze Age Canaan is attested through these two fragments of gaming boards and a pair of knucklebones for playing from Tell es-Safi, the Biblical Philistine city of Gath.

30 Squares, known as Senet in Egypt. Because the earliest Egyptian example comes from a Predynastic tomb at el-Mahasna (dated to c. 3500 B.C.E.), some scholars believe that Senet originated

in Egypt and was later introduced into Canaan as the Game of 30 Squares; although some scholars argue the exact opposite.

Be that as it may, the Egyptian name for Senet comes from the verb “to pass,” which refers to the way the playing pieces pass the 30 squares (or houses) on the board. Senet is a race game—the aim is to be the first to maneuver one’s pieces around a formalized track to reach the last square on the board. Proceeding in a serpent-like fashion, players move the pieces on the first row from left to right and from right to left on the second, and so forth. Everyone’s turn is determined by throwing dice or casting sticks.

The conventional Egyptian boards consisted of three rows and ten columns, with variants including three rows and 16 columns, two rows and 16 columns and four rows and ten or seven columns. The last five squares on the board are the “gate squares,” with special hieroglyphic markings.

This layout is what differentiates the Egyptian Senet from the Canaanite Game of 30 Squares, the latter having a different square distribution and no “gate squares.” Also significant is the difference of raw materials. While boards and playing pieces from Egyptian tombs were often made from exotic materials, such as ivory,



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## Archaeological Views

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gaming tables from Canaan were made of locally available chalkstone.

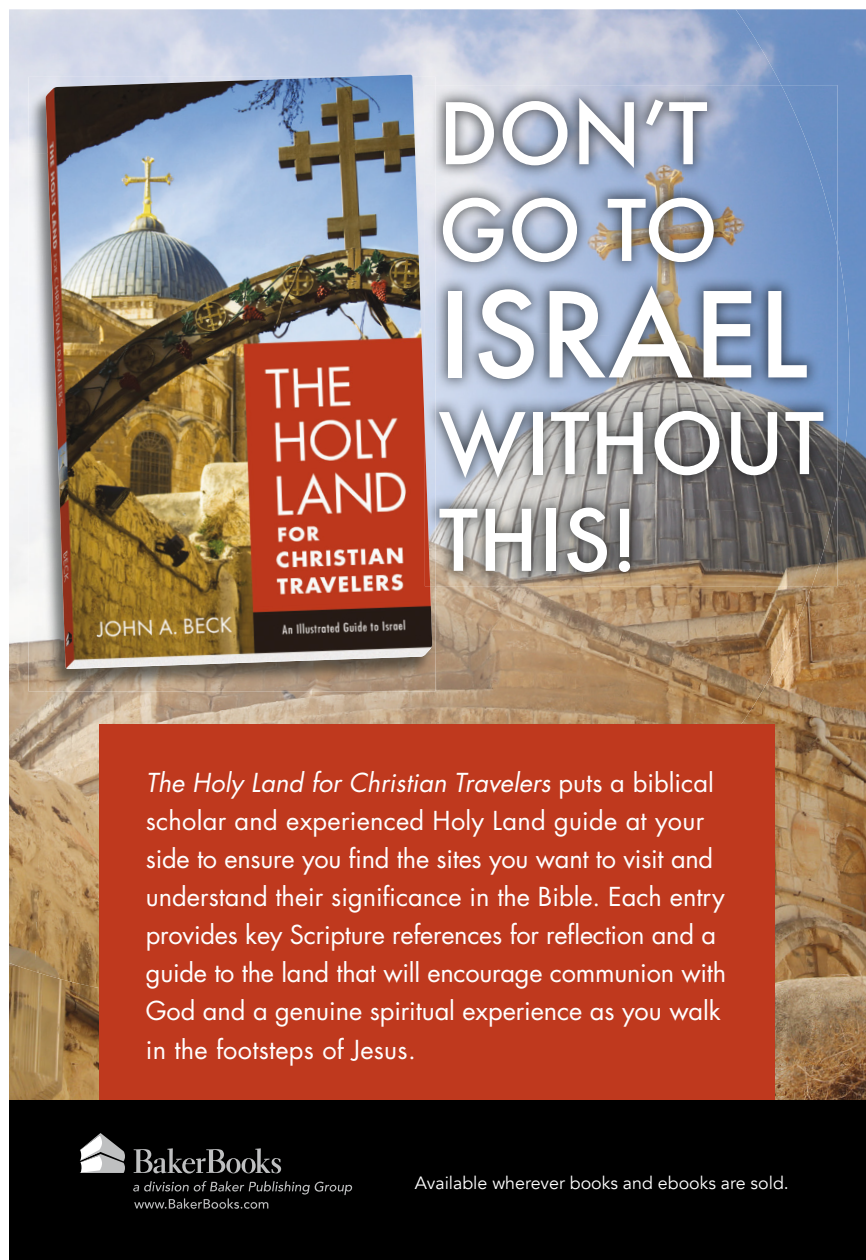
The recent excavations at Tell es-Safi (Biblical Gath), one of the prominent Early Bronze Age urban centers in the southern Levant, have unearthed three gaming boards made of soft chalkstone together with several playing pieces and

knucklebones—all for playing the Game of 30 Squares (see images on p. 22). Found in a residential zone at the eastern end of the site, these finds date to the Early Bronze Age IIIB. Due to recent advances in radiocarbon dating that support the so-called high chronology—putting the Early Bronze Age III to 2900–2600/2500 B.C.E.—the archaeological layer in which the boards were found dates to c. 2800–2600 B.C.E. The site

was abandoned immediately afterward.

Other Early Bronze Age board games from the southern Levant were uncovered at Megiddo (dated to the Early Bronze Age I, i.e., 3500–3200), Arad and Bab edh-Dhra, Jordan (both dated to the Early Bronze Age II, i.e., 3200–2900). Together with the examples from Tell es-Safi, these finds indicate that the Game of 30 Squares was played across the region during the Early Bronze Age—and not just by the elites or by those under Egyptian influence. The examples from Tell es-Safi further reveal that—just like the Egyptian Senet—the Canaanite Game of 30 Squares existed in a number of variants.

To this day, variants of the Game of 30 Squares and Senet are enjoyed in Egypt, Sudan, south Sinai and the Negev.



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*Shira Albaz is a doctoral student at the Bar-Ilan University and a field supervisor at the Tell es-Safi/Gath excavations. Her research focuses on Early Bronze Age material culture from the southern Levant.*



*Itzhaq Shai is Senior Lecturer and Director of the Institute of Archaeology at Ariel University. Since 2009, he has directed the Tel Burna Archaeological Project.*



*Haskel Greenfield is the Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Archaeology and Coordinator for the Judaic Studies Program at the University of Manitoba, as well as Codirector of the Tell es-Safi/Gath excavations.*



*Aren M. Maeir is Professor of Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University and Director of the Tell es-Safi/Gath Archaeological Project and Codirector of the Minerva Center for the Relations between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times.*