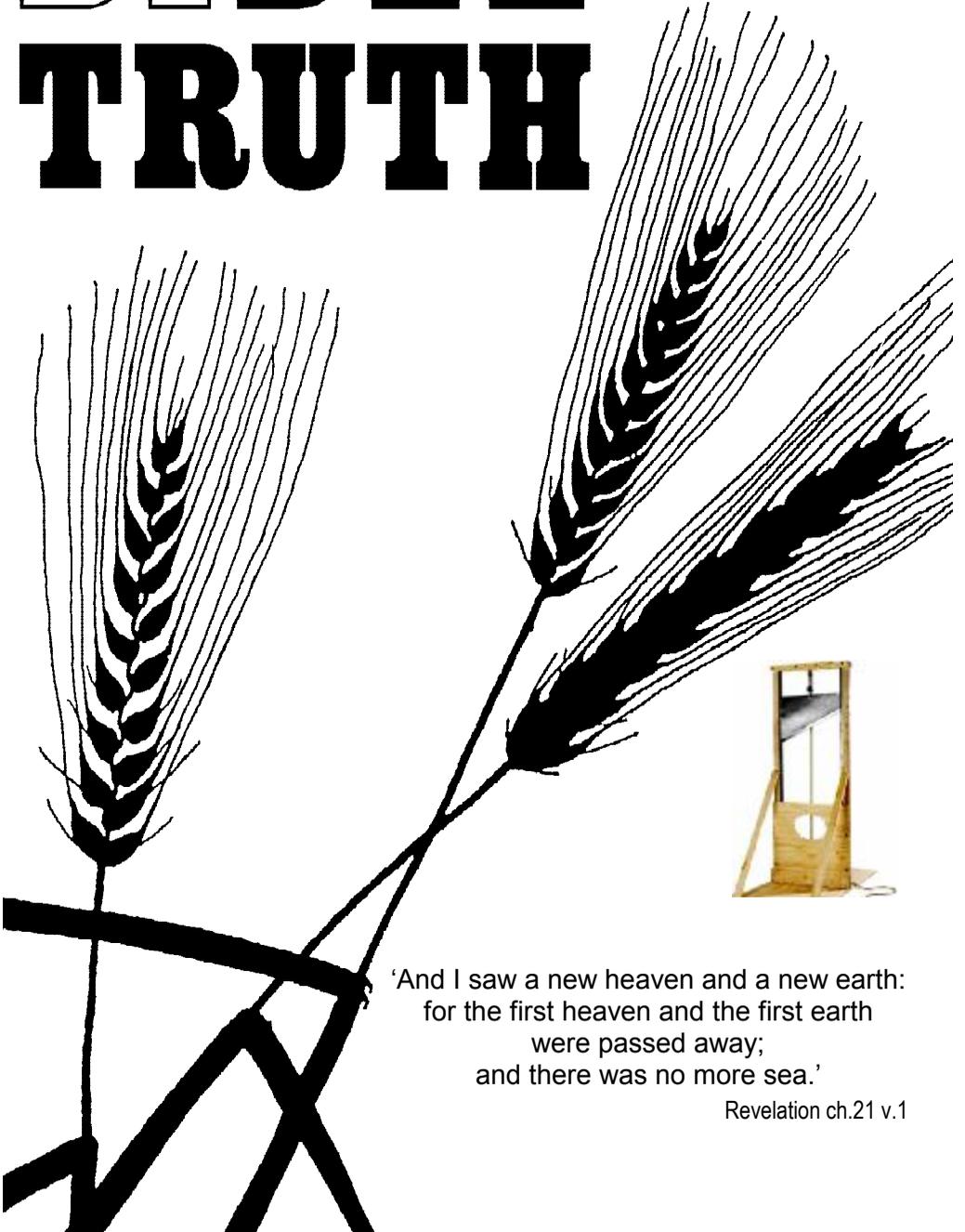


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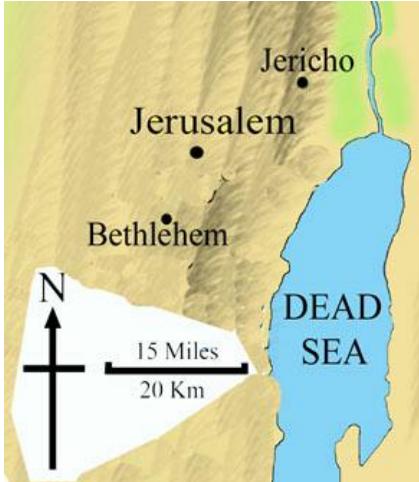


'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth:
for the first heaven and the first earth
were passed away;
and there was no more sea.'

Revelation ch.21 v.1

Tax Consignment Seal Proves Bethlehem's Early Existence

By Rosemary Northway



Photographer Clara Amit, COURTESY
ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY

A clay seal, or bulla, measuring just 1.5 centimetres, and found in soil being sifted in the course of archaeological excavations in the City of David, has proved to be the first material evidence of the existence of the city of Bethlehem during the First Temple period.

A bulla is a piece of clay affixed to a document or object in transit and stamped with the seal of the sender to discourage its being tampered with by unauthorised parties.

Three lines of ancient Hebrew script appear on the bulla.

Bishv'at בִּשְׁחָוָה (*Beshava at*)

Bat Lechem בַּת לֶשֶׁחַם (*Bethlehem*)

[Lemel] jekh עֵלְמֶלֶךְ (*Melech, i.e. 'king'*)

Eli Shukron, who is the director of the excavation on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, has commented,

'It seems that in the seventh year of the reign of a king (it is not clear if the King referred to here is Hezekiah, Manasseh or Josiah), a shipment was dispatched from Bethlehem to the king in Jerusalem. The bulla we found belongs to the group of "fiscal" bullae used to seal tax shipments remitted to the taxation system of the Kingdom of Judah in the late eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The tax could have been paid in the form of silver or agricultural produce such as wine or wheat'.

Shukron emphasises,

'this is the first time the name Bethlehem appears outside the Bible, in an inscription from the First Temple period, which proves that Bethlehem was indeed a city in the Kingdom of Judah, and possibly also in earlier periods'.

The first Biblical mention of Bethlehem occurs in the account of the death and burial of Rachel after the birth of Benjamin in Genesis ch.35 vv 16 and 19, and ch.48 v.7, where it appears under its former name of Ephrath.
