

# Looking for *The Source*

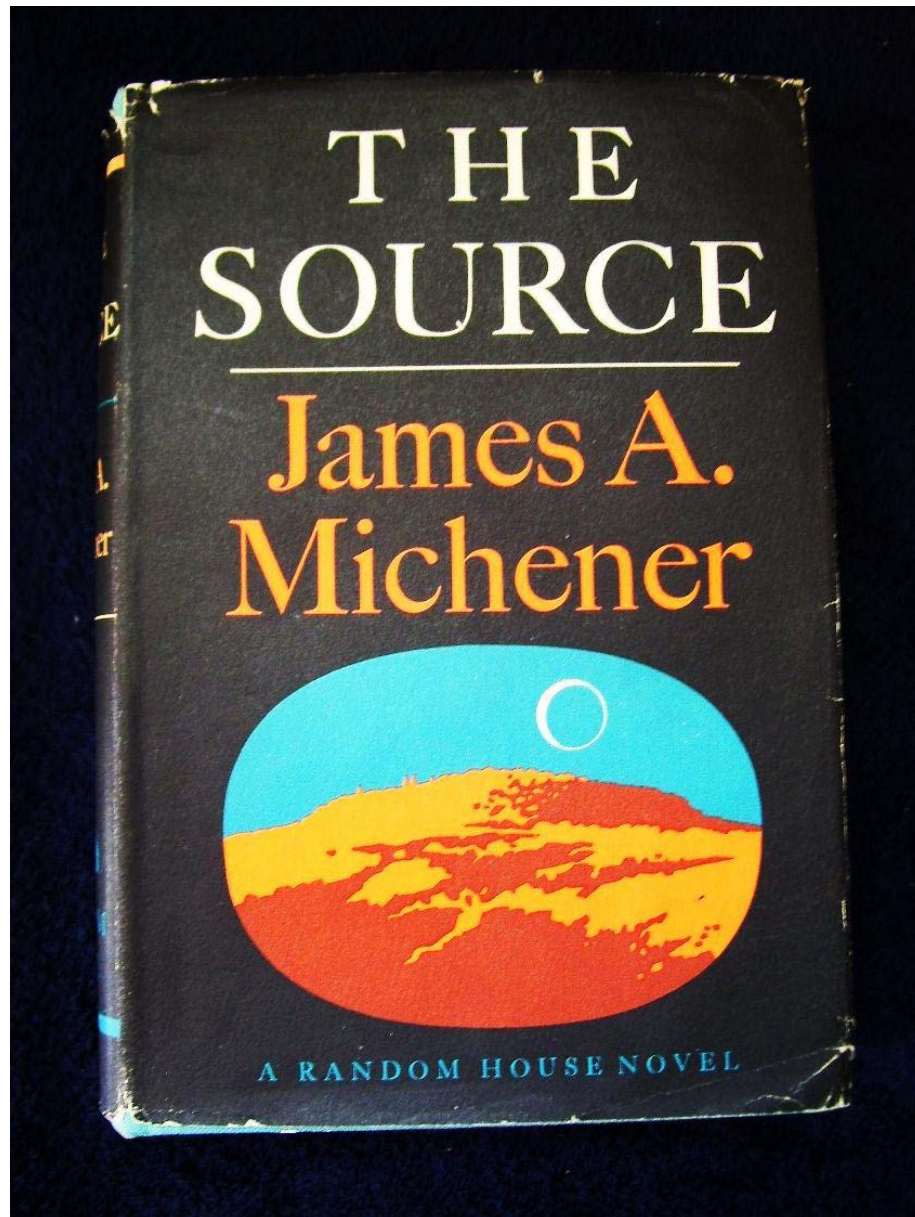
by Jack D. Elliott, Jr.

## I. The Tell

*The Source* (1965) by James A. Michener is the story of a tell, an ancient mound composed of layered debris of cities long gone. This particular tell, Tell Makor, is fictional and is located in the Galilee region of Israel. In telling the story of Tell Makor, the novel also relates the story of Judaism and to a large degree religious consciousness itself.

Michener is known for massive novels— this one is 909 pages -- with each focusing on a particular area of the world and covering hundreds, if not thousands, of years. His stated purpose for each of these works was “to create a universe to which the reader must surrender himself totally for an extended period of time. . . [and acquire] understandings, images and memories which will rest with him for a long time” (Michener quoted in John Kings, *In Search of Centennial: A Journey with James A. Michener*, Random House, 1978, p 97). In *The Source* Michener uses a complex narrative structure which he compared to the structure of a Cesar Franck symphony with “a theme at the beginning, a return to the themes at the end, and discursions and excursions during the body, with the theme repeated....It’s a complicated and sometimes beautiful and sometimes difficult ebb and flow of history.” (quoted in Stephen J. May, *Michener: A Writer’s Journey*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2005, p 174). Franck’s compositions began with a germinal motif from which emerged the principal themes, which retain their unity by virtue of their origin, or source. After the themes are developed in their variations, all are recapitulated in the final movement, effectively returning to the source.

The germinal theme in the novel is Tell Makor, a name that derives from *makor* (*maqor*), the Hebrew word for “source,” a term that links the mound to a mysterious, transcendent source from whence emerges life and humanity. The theme is emphasized by the cover illustration on the first edition which is the tell silhouetted against the sky (see illustration below). Although the image appears deceptively simple, like a Rorschach test it is ambiguous and evocative. In part it recalls symbols, such as the archetypal Holy Mountain -- whether Sinai, Moriah, Tabor, or Hermon -- or the ancient Near Eastern mythical mound of creation emerging from the waters of chaos. Like the surface of water, the cover image points to underlying depths while simultaneously hiding them. In *The Source* these depths are unfolded for the reader.



Dust jacket cover from *The Source* with the image of Tell Makor silhouetted against the sky

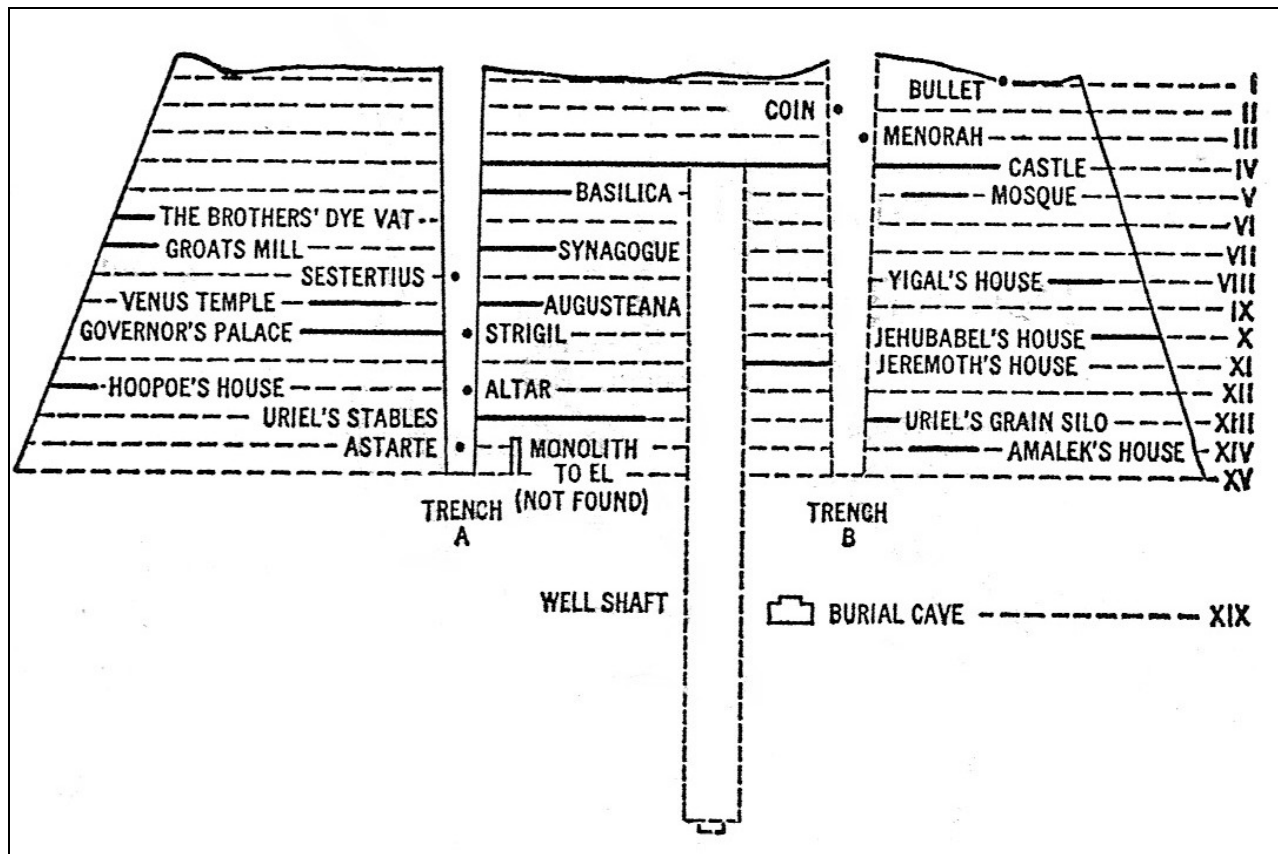
The novel is introduced by the opening textual unit entitled “The Tell,” which begins the story of the archaeological expedition that excavated Makor. Other segments of “The Tell” continue the story of the dig, appearing intermittently throughout with a final segment at the end that pulls the themes together. In the first segment the archaeological excavation begins in May 1964, the same month in which Michener completed the second draft of the novel. The principals of the excavation team consist of Catholic American, John Cullinane; Jewish Israelis, Vered Bar-El and Ilan Eliav; and Palestinian Muslim, Jemail Tabari, who represent the three major religious traditions that emerged from the Holy Land.

When the archaeological team arrived at Tell Makor, they saw

“a barren elliptical mound standing at the foot of one of the projecting spurs and rising high in the air . . . its top plateau was quite flat, as if some giant hand had smoothed it down; and the visible flanks of the mound were perfect earthen slopes. . . It looked unnatural, like a fortress without walls . . . .

“[It consisted of] the patiently accumulated residue of one abandoned settlement after another, each resting upon the ruins of its predecessor, reaching endlessly back into history. From the bare rock on which the first community of Makor had been built, to the grassy top, was seventy-one feet, made up of fallen bricks, ruptured stone walls, broken turrets, bits of prehistoric flint, and . . . fragments of pottery. . . .” (p 6. Unattributed citations are to the Random House edition of *The Source*)

At the beginning of the excavation, the archaeologists summarize the fragmentary and ambiguous literary references to Makor from the Amarna letters, the writings of Josephus, the Talmud, and a medieval chronicle. They also ponder the origin of the word Makor which Tabari notes probably referred to a lost water source (p 16). The team excavated two trenches through all the layers of ruin and rubble down to bedrock and in the process identified fifteen levels numbered from top down as Levels I through XV (see cross section of Makor below). The first, and uppermost, settlement encountered was the Crusader town Ma Coeur, the last of a succession of towns that extended downward to Level XV. There the archaeologists found evidence of the beginnings of agriculture from to the Natufian Period of 12,000 years ago.



Schematic cross-section of Tell Makor with the trenches that were excavated in the summer of 1964. The strata were not of uniform thickness and were actually irregular in thickness and continuity across the tell.

The excavation is, of course, about more than artifacts and information; John Cullinane reflects during the course of the work: “You start what looks like a simple dig. Historical fragments hiding in earth. And before you’ve filled the first basket you find yourself digging into your own understanding of the civilization involved.” (p 157)

The archaeological excavation is a metaphor for human inquiry into the past and into origins. Indeed the word *archaeology* (from the Greek *archaiologia* [ἀρχαιολογία], originally referring to “antiquarian lore,” “ancient legends,” or “history” according to Liddell and Scott’s Greek dictionary) is suggestive of this if one peels back its linguistic layers. The word is derived from *archaios* (ἀρχαῖος) -- from the beginning, origin, or *source* -- and *logos* (λόγος) -- referring to an order underlying reality. Thus archaeology suggests a search for meaning by delving into the past for an ancient *source*.

The fifteen levels represent the history of the tell lying latent beneath the surface. The excavation uncovers the levels from most recent to most ancient. In uncovering them the structure of the novel is sketched out in reverse order. The bulk of the narrative consists of fifteen stories, one for each level, each presented in chronological order beginning with the oldest level, Level XV, and proceed forward through time to Level I, which overlaps with the life-spans of the archaeologists. The archaeological levels are analogous to levels of narrative and time, and correspond to Makor at specific times with each level having its own distinctive buildings, landscape, and artifacts. Because of the importance of these physical components, Michener provides the reader with visual images, such as maps, plans, sections, and illustrations of artifacts. Each level is associated with an artifact that is depicted in a line drawing. The artifacts include remains of churches, mosques, and synagogues along with Roman coins, pottery, and stone tools. All allude, however cryptically, to some element of their particular story; for example, Level XV is represented by flint blades from a primitive sickle which is associated with the transformative beginnings of agriculture.

Given that the tell is the germinal motif of the novel’s structure, then the archaeological excavation unfolds the themes in reverse, or descending, order, which are then unfolded more explicitly in the stories in ascending order. The theme of the stories is the history of human activity and thought that converges on Makor. As Michener noted: “These are the glimpses of man, of what has happened to man in the Holy Land, and it comprises the bulk of the novel—nearly half a million words. The flashbacks look at society in terms of profound problems, built upon incidents implied by what the archeologists uncover” (quoted in May, p 174).

## II. Constructing the Tell

The geographical and artifactual elements that constitute Makor are as integral to the novel as the narrative structure. They reflect the intimate background knowledge that Michener invariably acquired for his novels through living in and exploring the lands that he wrote about. While writing *The Source*, he resided in Israel for about a year beginning in May 1963 where he used the Dan Carmel Hotel in Haifa as his base. From there he set out on field trips to visit sites and gain familiarity with the area. Images from site visits would be creatively reworked into *The Source*'s themes so Makor is not so much fictional as it is an amalgamation of real archaeology and geography.

Although it is frequently reported on the internet (without known attribution) that Michener based his tell solely on Megiddo--a large tell that was extensively excavated by the University of Chicago from 1925 through 1940--this is not true. While Megiddo no doubt influenced him, many similarities can be found in other sites, such as Gezer, Hazor, and Jericho, among others. Furthermore, Makor's range and continuity of occupation – from the Natufian to the Crusader Period – is without precedent in the area, leading one to the conclusion that Makor cannot be identified with any specific tell. Like the novelist William Faulkner (1897-1962) who drew on many real places in Mississippi to create his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Michener used numerous prototypes, based on sites that he visited and/or read about during his extensive research. Tell Makor was a composite creation, a complex symbol of human history and land, both fact and fiction, through which he wove his themes.

The idea for the novel came to Michener in spring 1963 during a visit, not to Megiddo, but to Athlit Castle, a Crusader castle sitting on remains dating to the Bronze Age and located on the Mediterranean coast south of Haifa (see photo of Athlit below). As he recalled,

“...they took me to see an old Crusader castle at Athlit. It was pretty well falling apart so they didn't allow tourists in general in, but they took us down into the donjon and they went on around a bend and I was left there alone, pretty far underground with this superb vaulting . . . .” (from an online typescript by Michener - see [link](#) )

“As I stood in the dungeon of that ancient fortress with the shadowy forms of warriors long dead moving in the dust, I suddenly conceived my entire novel *The Source*. Feverishly, in a small notebook I always carry, I outlined the seventeen chapters, taking no more than minutes to do so, and they remained just as I wrote them down, and in their exact order....” (quoted in May, *Michener: A Writer's Journey*, pp 159-160)

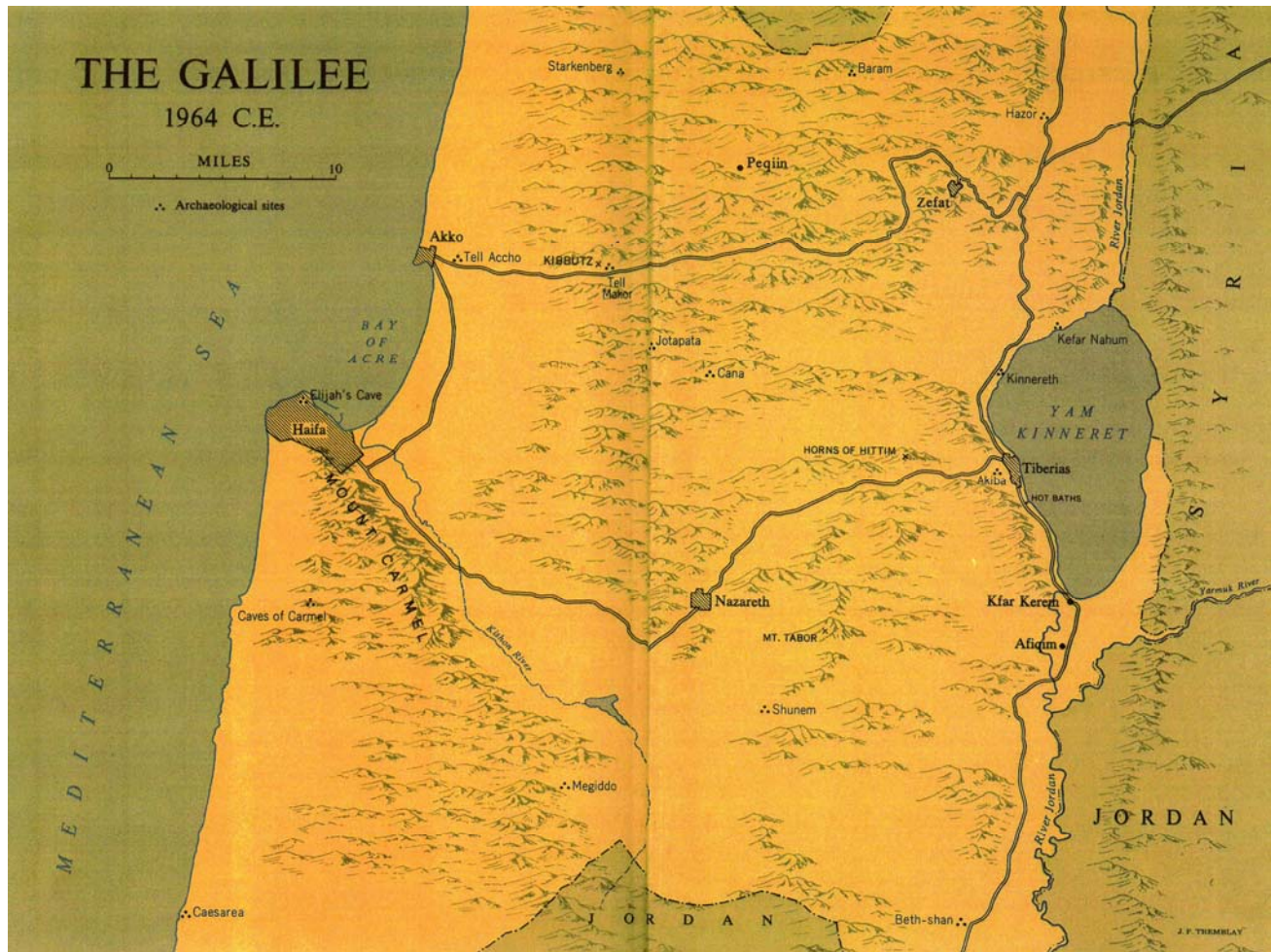


Ruins of Athlit castle

So Athlit was Michener's initial inspiration for Makor, and this inspiration was recalled in Makor's final settlement, the crusader town and castle Ma Coeur, the ruins that formed the uppermost level. However, Athlit and Makor were not identical. They were not at the same location; Athlit on the coast and Makor several miles inland. Furthermore, Makor was a tell, while Athlit was not although there are earlier deposits below the Crusader remains.

Insights into Michener's creative process can be gained from an examination of Makor's location which is depicted on the maps as located about ten kilometers (six miles) east of Akko (Acre) on the north side of the road to Zefat (Safed) and Damascus (see map below). One might think that this





Map of the Galilee from the endpapers of *The Source*. Makor is on the road east of Akko

was intended to be nothing other than a vague and unspecific location. However, it is not, because Michener had in mind an exact site for Makor and in fact provided the specific coordinates in the novel: 17072584 (pp 1, 7; the coordinates are based on the British survey of Palestine. The equivalent latitude-longitude is: 32° 55' 4" N; 35° 13' E), and these are not merely invented numbers; they pinpoint a prominent hill known as Har Gamal (see satellite image below) located about 10 km east of Akko ("the Hill of the Camel," named after the Bactrian camel because of its double-hump form, although ironically Bactrian camels are not indigenous to the area.).

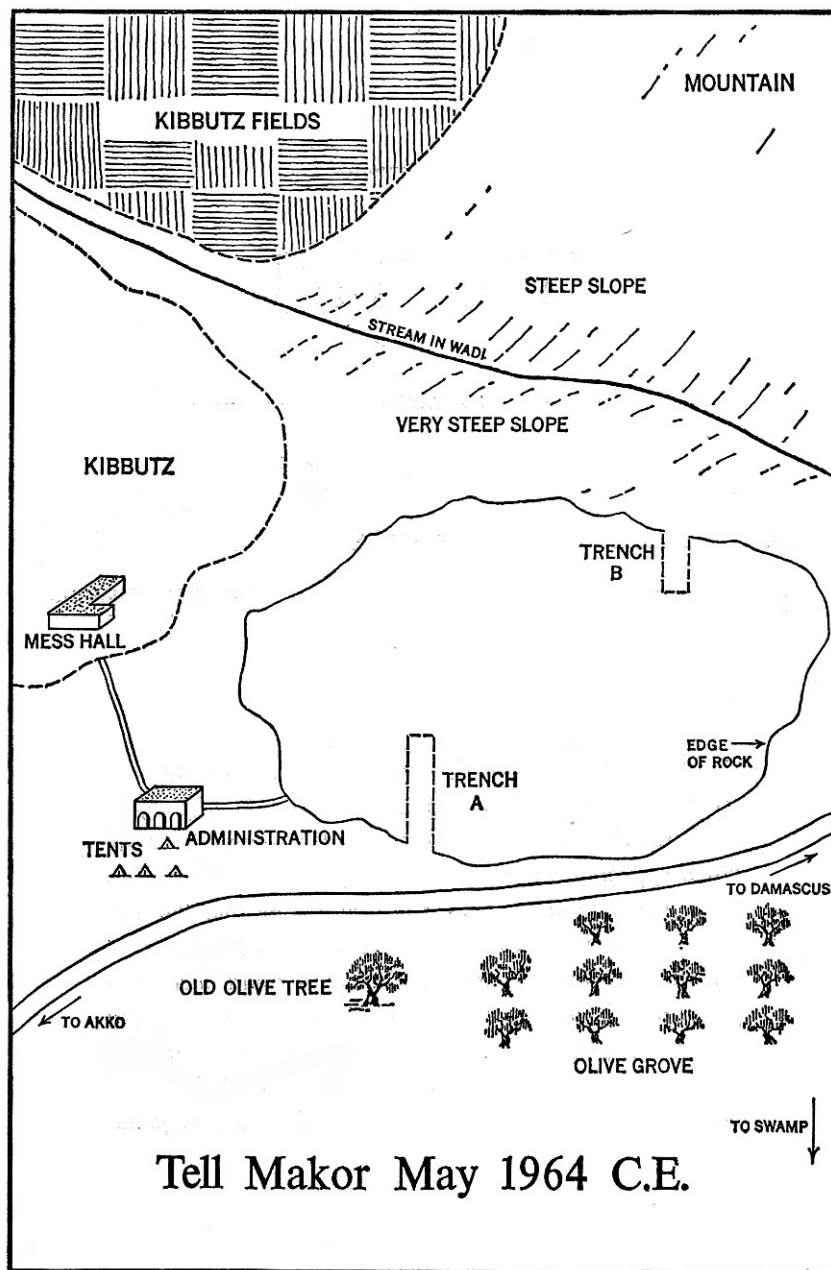


Oblique view of Har Gamal from the north. Note the location of HaYonim (Pigeon) Caves and the valley along the wadi (Itzhar Creek) with sufficient soil for agriculture, recalling the Family of Ur's early farming activities.

Although Har Gamal is not a tell, the site and environs are topographically similar to that shown on Michener's maps of the Makor (map on p 2 entitled "Tell Makor May 1964 C.E." [see below]; and also map, "Makor 9831 B.C.E." p 68). The similarities are as follow:

- South of Har Gamal is a road leading from Akko to Tsefat in the direction of Damascus.
- North of Har Gamal is a deep, wide wadi (Nahal Yizhar in Hebrew; Wadi El Amik in Arabic) as is also on Michener's map.
- North of the wadi are higher hills, the beginning of the hill country of the Lower Galilee; on Michener's map this area is identified as "Mountain."
- Northwest of Har Gamal is more level land, a suitable area for Michener to place Kibbutz Makor and its farmland.





Map of Makor from *The Source*. To compare with the image of Har Gamal one needs to recall that with Har Gamal north is to the bottom while on the map of Makor north is to the top.

This is not to say that there are no differences; Har Gamal is not a tell; there are no layers of occupational remains on it, although there is an Iron Age Israelite fort. In fact the top appears to be too irregular to have been a suitable place for urban settlement. Nevertheless, it seems extremely improbable that Michener would have accidentally provided the coordinates for a site so similar to Makor. The conclusion is almost inescapable that he based Makor and its environs on this site while simultaneously transforming it into a place where millennia of history converged.

Michener's research assistant, John Kings, noted that there were certain sites that "seduced" Michener, causing him to return again and again for inspiration (Kings, *In Search of Centennial*, p 68). Because Michener specifically identified Har Gamal as the site of Makor, it certainly played an important role in his creative processes. One can easily imagine his being drawn to the site, to walk and explore it. In his mind's eye he saw the imaginary tell, kibbutz, and archaeological expedition of the present day, and before that, the ancient city Makor. He would have roughly sketched the terrain and used these for his cartographer Jean Paul Tremblay to draft the maps used in the book (Tremblay was the cartographer for many of Michener's novels).

Other than the site itself, there is also reason to believe that a local source might have served as an inspiration for the name, Makor. Seven kilometers (four miles) west of Har Gamal there is an Arab village named El-Makr (see photo below). As written in Roman letters it appears quite similar to Makor. When the words are rendered in Arabic and Hebrew scripts the similarity is not as apparent considering that Makr (مكر, מכר) is written with a *kaff* (k; Arabic ك; Hebrew כ), while Makor (מקור, مقور) is written with a *qof* (q; Hebrew ק; Arabic ق) — which technically speaking should have been transcribed as *Maqor* — yet there is enough similarity when the names are rendered in Roman script as *Makr* and *Makor* that one suspects that Michener may have linked the village name to "the source" and transferred it to his fictional tell at nearby Har Gamal.



Har Gamal (background) with the Arab village El-Makr in the foreground. Note the two "humps" that are suggestive of a Bactrian camel.

Having established his setting at Har Gamal, Michener then had the tell accretionally grow on the hill, using as fodder for his imagination elements from the archaeology, history, and religion of the

area, forging the elements into one story and one place. Tell Makor is consequently a microcosm of the Holy Land, constructed of places and artifacts Michener had seen or read about during his research, and these elements are unfolded in the novel.

## III. Levels and Themes

The story of Level XV entitled “The Bee Eater” takes place in 9834-9831 BC during the Natufian Period. Here many, if not most, of *The Source*’s primary themes begin to emerge. The story’s protagonist is a man named Ur with whom “the remembered history of Makor begins” (p 70). With Ur begins the transition to agriculture that would revolutionize human life and thought, producing in its course villages, then cities and writing, and a heightened awareness of human existence. Here are established many themes—such as the well and the monolith—that would become part of the tell, appearing and reappearing, developing as they do.

At this time the settlement that would form the tell had not yet been established on the bare rocky hill:

“There was a well\* and there was a rock. At the well men had been drinking sweet water since that first remote day, about a million years ago, when an apelike man had wandered up from Africa. The watering place had always been known in memory if not in speech as Makor, the source.

“The rock was a huge, flat expanse of [limestone]\*\* with a high place in the middle from which gentle slopes fell away on all sides. The rock was barren; it contained absolutely nothing, not even a carving or a pile of stone to mark some deity. . . . It was simply a rock, large enough to form in the future the foundation of a Canaanite town or the footing for a Crusaders’ fort.” (p 69)

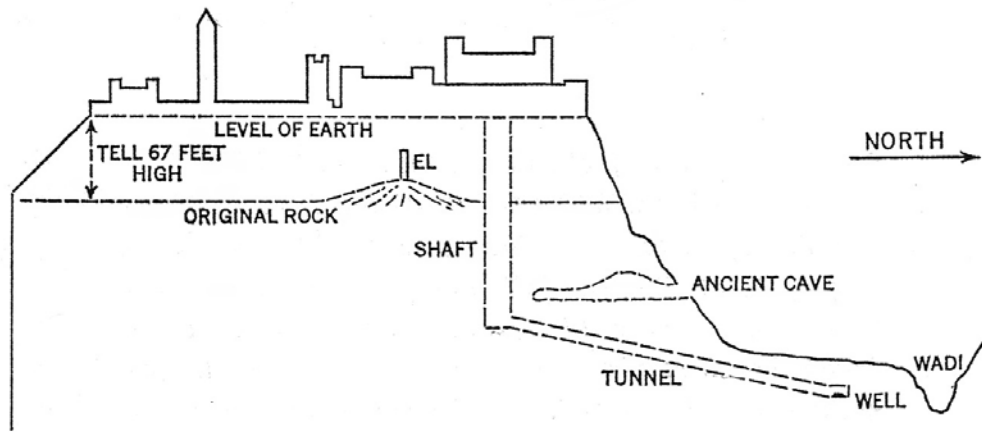
\*At this time the “well” was actually a spring. Over the millennia, a stone structure was built around it to hold back the growing accumulation of rubble and maintain access to the water. This structure eventually became a well shaft of considerable depth (pp 100, 232)

\*\*The text actually reads granite. However, this is a mistake. First, there is no granite in the Galilee, where limestone is predominant. Second, Michener later indicated repeatedly that the hill was constituted of limestone (pp 75, 230, 232, 234, 888, 893).

Ur was the progenitor of a long family line that runs through the novel’s twelve thousand year timeframe. At the beginning of the story, Ur and his family reside in a cave under the rock, or hill. (p 69; see map “Makor 9831 B.C.E.” on p 68 and section “Ma Coeur 1291 C.E.” on p 588 [see below]).

"For the past seventy thousand years the cave had been continuously occupied by Ur's ancestors, one generation after the other, leaving behind them brief mementos of their short and ugly lives. Ur could remember as a boy, in that far corner over there, finding a long-forgotten skeleton encased in hard rock which had formed when rainwater seeped down over the limestone, and later, back in the narrow part of the tunnel, he had come upon a hand axe, adroitly chipped from a core of flint by some brutish, stooped figure more than two hundred thousand years ago." (p 75)

## Ma Coeur 1291 C.E.



Cross section of Tell Makor from main gate on left to postern gate on right as it appeared in 1291 C.E. when rubble had accumulated to a height of 67 feet. From left to right the structures of Ma Coeur are: tower of the main gate, minaret of the mosque, Crusader tower added to the Byzantine basilica of Father Eusebius, castle moat, main gate of the castle of Count Volkmar, principal castle building, north wall of the castle. The water system dug by Jabaal the Hoopoe in 966-963 B.C.E. is shown as reopened by Gunter of Cologne in 1105 C.E. The cave occupied by the Family of Ur in 9834 B.C.E. is shown, as is the monolith to El which this same family erected in 9831 B.C.E. and which now stands buried under the altar of the basilica.

As the family begins to cultivate grain they move from the security of the cave to a house of their own construction in order to better protect and work their patch of wheat. To better harvest the crop the son invented a sickle using the small flint blades that were discovered by the archaeologists 12,000 years later. At the wife's suggestion, the family erected a large monolith on top of the hill, which echoed humanity's dawning consciousness of the Transcendent; around the monolith evolved the town, and as successive layers of debris buried the monolith, temples, synagogues, and churches continued to be constructed over it, recalling its sanctity. In essence "The Bee Eater" deals with the transition of human life and thought associated with agriculture and the beginning of the settlement of the tell.

Michener did not have to go far a field to find the inspiration for the earliest settlement at Makor. Although there is no known cave inside Har Gamal, there is a large and well-known one -- HaYonim Cave (the Cave of the Pigeons) -- located across the wadi, and it bears a striking resemblance to Ur's cave (see photo below). The archaeological remains associated with HaYonim Cave and the terrace (HaYonim Terrace) that fronts the cave, are all prehistoric and have been subject to extensive excavation with numerous ensuing publications. The archaeological deposits in the cave begin in the Mousterian Period (ca 250,000 - 100,000 BC) and end during the Natufian Period (ca 10,000 - 8000 BC), while the deposits on the terrace begin in the Kebaran Period (ca 14,000-10,000 BC) and extend through the Natufian. Remains of residential structures found in the Natufian levels of both of both the cave and the terrace suggest the Natufian transition to village life and agriculture.





HaYonim Cave with terrace in front

As with Makor, so also with HaYonim, occupation in the cave begins during the Middle Paleolithic and continues through the Natufian, at which time houses were constructed at both sites outside the caves. The Natufian was first defined by the archaeologist Dorothy Garrod who excavated a number of prehistoric sites in the Holy Land during the late 1920s and early 1930s (note the mention on p 15).

As noted, *The Source* was published in 1965, the year in which Ofer Bar-Yosef, Eitan Tchernov, and Beno Arensburg of Hebrew University began excavating HaYonim Cave (the terrace was tested in 1967 and more fully excavated in 1974-75 by Donald O. Henry of the University of Tulsa). Consequently, there were no excavations or excavation reports pertaining to HaYonim when Michener was researching. However, it seems likely--if not certain--that the general nature of the prehistoric remains must have been known prior to the beginnings of excavation for Hebrew University to invest in an excavation in 1965. Presumably Michener had contact with someone who showed him HaYonim Cave and Terrace and informed him of their general chronology. Furthermore, it seems almost indisputable that Michener transferred the prehistoric cave settlement from across the wadi and placed it under the hill of Makor to provide a direct link between the prehistoric cave life and the town that developed on the tell.



HaYonim Cave

Until the time of Ur, there was little activity on the summit of the hill. A significant change came when Ur's wife suggested the erection of a monolith:

“If we erect on the highest part of the rock a tall stone, the storm and the wind and the wild boar will see it and will know that we wish them well” . . . . And so all the men of the cave went with Ur's son to a part of the wadi where stones grew, and there, with flintcutters and wedges and heavy stones dropped as hammers, they broke away a monolith much taller than a man and rounded on one end. They shoved and hauled it onto the highest point of the rock, where after two months of sweating and building of earthen ramps, they upended it into a socket that the boy had hacked into the solid rock. Securing it with stones wedged under the



corners they left it standing upright, a thing without a name, but a thing from which they nevertheless took much consolation. It was their spokesman to the storm.” (pp 94-95)

Reminiscent of other monoliths or *menhirs*, erected by prehistoric cultures around the Mediterranean, this monolith is a recognition of the Transcendent dimly perceived in the forces of nature, in this case, the storm, the wind, and the wild boar. In centuries to come the nameless stone would be called El, the high god of the Canaanites. Later after it was recognized that the various forces of nature were controlled, not by a number of anthropomorphic gods, but by One that was transcendent, the name came to mean, under the Israelites, simply God (the surnames of the two Israeli archaeologists at Makor – Bar-El [“son of God”] and Eliav [“My God is father”] -- incorporated the name).



Boulders on top of Har Gamal – possible site of the monolith

After the development of agriculture, a town called Makor developed on the hill around the monolith. One is reminded of Jericho, located by the spring Ain es-Sultan, and whose deepest levels date to the Natufian and whose uppermost levels date to the Bronze Age witness the earliest beginnings of urbanism (Kathleen Kenyon’s excavation at Jericho is mentioned on p 15). In the story of Level XIV, “Of Death and Life,” set in 2202 BC, Michener described the transformation:

“. . .in the more than seven thousand years that had elapsed from that day on which the Family of Ur had erected its monolith on the rock a sequence of changes had transformed the area. One unrecorded civilization after another had flourished briefly—successful ones

had lasted a thousand years; the unsuccessful, only two or three hundred—but each had left behind an accumulation of rubble as its buildings were demolished and its inhabitants led away to slavery. Ruins had grown upon ruins until some twenty feet of debris obscured the original rock, obliterating even its memory, except that from its secure footing in the high place the ancient monolith still pushed its head through rubble to protrude a few feet into sunlight. It was the holiest object in this part of the land and was believed to have been placed in its exalted position by the gods themselves.” (p 100)

By this time the monolith had come to represent “the source of all power, the god El,” while being supplemented by three more monoliths, representing the gods of storm, water, and the sun. All four stood in a row in front of the temple (p 102). One is forcibly reminded of the row of monoliths excavated by R.A.S. Macalister on the Gezer High Place in 1902, and there is little doubt that Michener was familiar the Gezer (cf. p 15).

In the subsequent stories, settlement merges into settlement as the tell develops layer by layer. Different ethnicities including Canaanites, Hittites, Hebrews, and Israelites come and go, intertwine and merge. Through it all representatives of the Family of Ur appear including Urbaal (2202-2201 BC), Uriel (1419 BC, Level XIII), Jabaal (966-963 BC, Level XII), Jeremoth (606-605 BC, Level XI), Rabbi Asher (326-351 AD, Level VII), and the Volkmar line of rulers of the Crusader town of Ma Coeur (Levels IV-V, 12<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). The monolith is eventually buried under the layers of debris, but its site is effectively remembered through a series of temples, synagogues, and churches that are constructed over it. Such a continuous use of the same sacred space recalls Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, along with the overlay of temples at Megiddo and Eridu, the latter in Sumer. Eridu in particular is associated with the first emergence of the first cities, where the city developed around a temple nucleus similar to the development of Makor around the monolith and temple of El.

Interwoven into this setting is the theme that Michener was focusing on, the Jewish tradition, or perhaps more accurately the Hebrew/Israelite/Jewish tradition. The first representative of this tradition – Joktan the Habiru, “a nomad from the desert” -- arrived at Makor in 2201 BC. In contrast to the inhabitants of Makor and the Family of Ur who were polytheistic -- worshipping several gods including El -- Joktan followed only one god, also named of El (pp 133-138). Centuries later Joktan was followed in 1419 BC by another nomad, Zadok the Hebrew, who called God by the name El-Shaddai. Zadok’s tribe eventually burned Makor and required all survivors to become worshipers of El-Shaddai. Over the millennia that followed, the two lines – the Family of Ur and the tradition that became Judaism – intermingled. The line of Ur generally were earthy, pragmatic, and tended to see God through images, natural and man-made, while the latter line generally emphasized a more rigorous moral code and rejected the use of images to depict God. These generalizations did not always hold. Indeed in one story – “The Law,” 326-351 AD –Rabbi Asher is both a Jew and a member of the Family of Ur (p 477).

During the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, Jabaal, a descendant of Ur, transformed the well which lay outside the town. He excavated a tunnel from inside the city walls to the well outside the walls. Afterward he buried, and thereby concealed, the mouth of the well leaving it accessible only by the tunnel. Consequently the town could access its source of water—and thereby sustain life—during times of



siege. Such tunnels are reminiscent of similar constructions from the same period at Hazor, Megiddo, Jerusalem, and El-Jib (Gibeon).

After millennia of occupation the town came to an end when Crusader Ma Coeur was destroyed by a Mamluk army in 1291 AD. All the buildings were leveled, and the tunnel leading to the well was buried under rubble. Afterward:

“The silent mound slept beneath the sun, hiding the sweet well that through ten thousand years had brought life to so many. Its waters trickled away through subterranean channels until they entered the malignant swamp which extended itself year after year over the no longer fertile ground. How great the desolation was, how crushed and puny the grandeur that had existed here. Even the birds came no more, for the grasses that had grown centuries before now perished in the desiccated air; the mound had become part of a desert” (p 634).



A tell silhouetted against the sky--Tell Kisson

For the concluding three stories for Levels I-III there was no settlement on the tell; the levels were only thin deposits of natural origin. The action consequently moves elsewhere, primarily to nearby

Haifa, Tiberias, and Zefat (Safed). However, each story involves a brief return to the desolate tell long enough for someone to leave an artifact: a menorah, a coin, and a fired bullet. Of note, the last story which is set against the backdrop of the Israeli war for independence includes the archaeologist Ilan Eliav as a character. He was then a soldier.

Having briefly surveyed the development of the novel's themes, we can recapitulate them as follows:

1. **The tell** itself with the excavation is the primary theme, the germinal motif. It begins and ends the book. Formed by the debris of the successive settlements, it melds all of the other themes into one complex fabric. Each rock, artifact, and level points, however ambiguously to a multitude of associations. The image of the tell integrates all of these associations into a multi-layered, multi-dimensional symbol, representing the past into which we delve through archaeology for a forgotten source.
2. **The spring, or well**, at the base of the tell from whence the name *makor*/source derives, symbolizing as it does, the source of life. The access to water effectively maintained the continuous settlement there. The well and the connecting shaft were buried and lost when the Crusader town of Ma Coeur was destroyed in 1291, which was the primary reason that the site was not occupied afterward.
3. **The Family of Ur** appeared in a long genealogical line throughout the novel as Canaanites, Israelites, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Their presence at Makor was in part because of the presence of water.
4. **The monolith** erected by Ur, a symbol of the Transcendent as experienced obliquely behind the forces of nature. Buried under the accumulating layers of the tell, the site of the monolith is remembered as a sacred place, suggesting continuity between the early intuitions and the religions that later developed.
5. **The successive settlements** --usually called Makor -- that developed on top of the hill. Into each of these settlements were incorporated in some fashion the four preceding themes, while also integrating the various historical and religious themes.
6. **The Jewish/Israelite/Hebrew tradition** begins later than the others, first appearing in the second story with the arrival of a tribe of Habiru and continues through the centuries interacting with the Family of Ur.

Using these themes and focusing on Makor as a microcosm, Michener sketches out human history. As he focuses on the evolution of the Jewish tradition he also illustrates the dawning of religious consciousness as a growing awareness of the mystery of creation, namely *that* things exist rather than not exist. To a large degree this revolves around the paradox of the mystery that we have in part to symbolize and understand the Mystery through analogs, or finite images based upon experience. This is largely represented by the Family of Ur. On the other hand there is the recognition that all images fail to capture the being of the transcendent God. This is represented by the Jewish tradition with its prohibition on the use of images for depicting God.

#### IV. The Source

The conclusion of the novel is the final installment of “The Tell” narrative. It is November 1964, and after six months the dig is coming to an end. Although the strata have all been plumbed and identified, the archaeologists still have not answered a primary question: where was the source of water that permitted the settlement to exist?

Of all the archaeologists, Jemail Tabari has the deepest, intuitive understanding of the land and the most likely to solve the mystery. In a reflective scene which identifies him as a descendant of Ur, Tabari wanders over the tell pondering where the buried well might lie. We can well imagine Michener himself walking the same path:

“as a member of the Family of Ur he had a keen sense of land and he somehow felt that the earliest farmers must have sought fields at the bottom of sloping land, so that what rains fell would irrigate their crops and bring down each year fresh sediment to serve as fertilizer for soil which would otherwise be quickly depleted. Near the rock of Makor, where would such land have been?

“He stopped his thinking, made his mind a blank, and tried to conjure up the bedrock of this tell as it had existed, not eleven thousand years ago, but two hundred thousand, three hundred thousand . . . He began to perspire as his body grew one with the ancient land. His hands grew clammy and he breathed hard. For if he could calculate where this sloping rock had ended he might deduce where the missing well had been, and if he found that, he might project the history of the tell backward sixty or a hundred thousand years” (pp 887-888).





View from Har Gamal towards HaYonim Cave as Michener, and Tabari, would have seen it

In a moment of insight Tabari -- supported by Eliav -- begins an excavation in the side of the tell that leads to the discovery of the buried cave in which Ur had lived before moving to a house. In the far recesses of the cave is discovered a human burial accompanied by tools and decorative items; Ur had looked upon the burial as a boy (pp 75, 889-891). However, the remains dated to ca 65,000 BC -- 55 millennia older than Ur -- which pushed Makor's known history far back into the Paleolithic period (p 898). Subsequently a stone hand ax dating to ca 200,000 BC was discovered, and the history of Makor receded further and further into the remote past (pp 894-895; In this case, the ax dates to the approximate beginning of settlement in HaYonim Cave).

Shortly after these discoveries, Eliav happened to tap on the cave's wall with a pick. There was a hollow sound. Breaking the stone away, he found behind the wall a dark cavity which proved to be the partly filled tunnel, first excavated by Jabaal the Hoopoe in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC to provide the settlement on the tell with underground access to the well. It had been forgotten after having been buried with the destruction of the Crusader town. Tabari was chosen to go first, to crawl through the hole broken by Eliav and into the tunnel. From there he followed it as it angled down deeper and deeper

“and at last he came to a silent place where things ended, dust and footfall alike; and as he looked down into the darkness he could not estimate how far below him lay the water, but



he dislodged a fragment of the roof and dropped it. After a while water splashed. The well of the Family of Ur was found, that sweet source from which all had sprung.” (p 894)

Afterward each of the three archaeologists would occasionally make their way down the tunnel to sit and reflect. In a short passage that epitomizes the novel, Michener described them sitting

“beside the well of Makor where living creatures had crouched two hundred thousand years before. For each ...it was a mystic rite, huddling there in the cave: to Tabari it was a return to the ancient sources of his people; to Eliav it was the spot where man had begun his long wrestling match with the concept of God; to Cullinane it was the beginning of those philosophical analyses with which he would be engaged for the balance of his life; but to all it was the source, the primeval spot where the growth of civilizations had begun” (p 898)

Although the well Makor was finally discovered, the monolith – that Michener called “perhaps the most significant of the remains” (p 849) -- was not. The implication is that both the history that the archaeologist sought to recover and the Transcendent which the monolith represented can never fully be known, that they are mysteries into which we dig with only limited results.

Although *The Source* is often characterized as being simply about the history of Judaism, and in fact much of it is devoted to that tradition, yet Michener weaves a larger fabric that includes much of the history, thought, and spirituality of the Holy Land, seeming to point beyond the variations to underlying themes. In the end his subsidiary themes return to the germinal motif: the tell and the excavation. All together symbolize the history of human experience in the Holy Land and the universal human experience. Into Tell Makor the reader and the archaeologists penetrate only to find that the object of their quest, the Ultimate Source, is beyond human grasp.

---

### *Credits:*

- Illustrations from the book – *The Source* – James A. Michener – Random House, 1965
- Aerial Map – Google maps
- Other Photos – [www.biblewalks.com](http://www.biblewalks.com) – Holy Land sites review
- Further reading: [Har Gamal](#) and [Pigeons caves](#)

Article published on: April 25, 2009, revised March 26, 2010

Author of the article - **Jack D. Elliott, Jr.** - Historical archaeologist, USA