

ALLEGED ERRORS VS. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

Critics have long insisted that there are errors and contradictions in the Bible. To be sure, there are difficulties to sort through in order to arrive at a plausible explanation of a text in question. Since other works have adequately treated specific contradictions at length,¹ we will simply offer ways of approaching passages that will help guard against reaching unwarranted conclusions. In most cases we have discovered that Bible difficulties may be resolved by correcting the following logical and hermeneutical mistakes.

Mistakes to Avoid in Approaching Biblical Passages

Assuming that extrabiblical literature determines the historicity of a biblical passage. Conservative and liberal Bible scholars often fall prey to this in their effort to identify the genres contained in Scripture with genres of authors from the Greco-Roman or Near-Eastern literature. Once the identification is made, scholars illegitimately transfer the license to fabricate narrative (as was often done by ancient nonbiblical authors—for example, Greco-Roman biographers) to the biblical text, deeming a passage “poetic,” a “special effect,” “legend,”* or some combination of these. Though extrabiblical literature can be beneficial in clarifying or illuminating a text, the best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture.

Assuming that no additional information will clarify a text.² Some are quick to pronounce the text in error simply because it is not fully understood. But this wrongfully

* For an example of this mistake as it applies to the New Testament, see Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 34, 185-186, 306 fn. 114, 548-553. Also see our discussion of Licona in chapter 12.

assumes that a lack of information or knowledge is equivalent to a contradiction in knowledge or facts. Rather, we should simply acknowledge our lack of information and understanding and wait for more information to surface. There will be some mysteries (for example, Deuteronomy 29:29) that will have to wait for clarification; this is how all other disciplines (for example, science) must operate.

Assuming that the Bible conveys factually incorrect information instead of giving it the benefit of the doubt. Historians have long agreed that ancient documents should be considered innocent until proven guilty. This is how we treat nonbiblical ancient documents, such as the histories of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great, even though these works have much less documentary support than the Bible. Besides, no one would approach life with a guilty-until-proven innocent assumption, for this would lead to practical absurdities involving, among many things, road signs, shopping, restroom gender identification, and business transactions.

Assuming that our personal interpretations of Scripture are as inerrant as the divinely inspired text. Several alleged errors in the Bible can be traced to this common mistake. We must recognize that many Bible difficulties are due to conflicts between our own *interpretations* of a given text rather than actual contradictions contained in the Scripture itself. In other words, the conflict often exists at the *interpretive* level and not at the textual level. Recognizing that we have a fallible interpretation of the infallible text will go far in protecting us from viewing Scripture as a flawed revelation.

Assuming that words have meaning in themselves instead of discovering the whole context of a biblical passage in order to gain its meaning. On a micro level, some difficulties in Scripture are easily solved when we realize that words have *usage* and sentences have *meaning*. For example, the word *run* can mean a number of different things depending on how it is used (for example, a drip of paint on a wall, a tear in a stocking, a score in a baseball game, to jog or sprint, to operate a machine, and so on) in a sentence. The complete sentence (and often surrounding sentences) will many times provide the reader a clear understanding of how the word is being used.

On the macro level, the context of a statement is essential for understanding what is being said. For example, the Bible says that Adam and Eve would “*not* surely die” (Genesis 3:4 ESV) if they ate of the fruit from the forbidden tree. However, this seems to be a contradiction of God’s earlier statement that they would “surely die” if they ate of the fruit (Genesis 2:17 ESV). We solve the apparent contradiction by understanding its context. The former statement (Genesis 3:4) is an inerrant record of Satan’s lie, whereas the latter statement (2:17) is an inerrant record of God’s statement of truth. The fundamental principle that guides real-estate investments—location, location, location—also holds true in hermeneutics; the meaning of a passage is discovered by understanding the sentence in its context, context, context!

Failing to understand that the Bible is the best commentary on the Bible. Difficult passages can often be understood by appealing to clear passages. This means we can

eliminate interpretive options based on what is clearly understood to be true in other passages. For example, the difficult passage of James 2:24 asserts that “a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” (NKJV). It would appear that the verse teaches salvation by faith and works. However, Paul’s clear teaching in Romans 4:5 that righteousness comes only through faith and not by works should provide us with the truth of salvation by which we understand James 2:24. We can now understand that James is referring to man’s justification in the eyes of other men, since we humans do not know who is of faith except through seeing the actions and works of one another. Conversely, Paul is speaking about righteousness in the eyes of God, who needs no works to see since He already knows our heart.

Forgetting that the Bible had human writers who used human expressions and language. The Bible was written by humans and for humans and therefore utilizes human language for our understanding. This means that at times writers use linguistic expressions that are from an observational or phenomenological perspective; that is to say, the writers often expressed truths based on how things *appeared* to them from their vantage point. For example, Joshua 10:12-13 says the sun stood still. We all know that it is the earth that rotates relative to the sun, not the other way around; nevertheless, Joshua explained the phenomenon as it appeared to him and not necessarily like it actually happened (that is, the earth most likely stopped its rotation as well as the moon). This is a perfectly acceptable means of communicating the truth of what occurred—just as our modern observational expressions of *sunrise* and *sunset* are adequate to communicate truth.

Critics like Bart Ehrman, the renowned New Testament scholar who has argued against the reliability of the New Testament in his recent books, often challenge the Scripture’s reliability due to minor scribal transmission mistakes found in the text. These come from human scribal error: minor mistakes such as in spelling, numbers, word and letter reversals, writing something twice that should be written once, skipping over a phrase or verse, and so on. We must remind ourselves that these mistakes are not a result of God’s error in revelation; rather, they are results of subsequent human error in transmission. In addition, these cumulative scribal errors affect no doctrine or meaning of the text in question. The passages affected are understood by exercising common sense or inspecting and comparing manuscripts. The original inspired text of the Bible (made up of the *autographs*) is both inerrant in its text and meaning, whereas the transmission copies (*apographs*) with their minor scribal errors in the text nonetheless remain inerrant in representing the voice of God (*ipsissima vox*). It simply does not follow that since the Bible was written by humans it *must* be in error, since humans do not *always* err—only *sometimes*.

Failing to recognize that biblical writers had to carefully select which material to include in their books. As is the case with all writers and historians, decisions must be made concerning what details to include in one’s reporting. To include “everything” would be impossible and even unnecessary. It would probably hinder the process of communication rather than enhancing it. The writer writes to an audience (or reader) with a specific theological purpose, so not everything will apply to the writer’s issue at hand, but

only those things that achieve his purpose. To assume something is false or does not exist because there is nothing written about it is to make a fallacious argument from silence. This charge against Scripture wrongfully attempts to establish truth based on what was not stated rather than on what was expressly stated in writing.

Names and Loan Words

The Old Testament documents are well-grounded in historical reality and give an accurate reflection of historical people, places, and events that took place in the context of everyday life. The renowned Old Testament scholar Robert Wilson has pointed out that there are 26 kings mentioned in the Hebrew Old Testament, and the spelling of the names of all but three are virtually identical to what has been deciphered in inscriptions written by the kings themselves. These names were copied with great accuracy over the centuries. Of the 120 consonant letters present in these names, none are out of their correct order in Scripture. This precise transmission stands in stark contrast to, as an example, a document written by an Egyptian priest named Manetho in approximately 280 BC. He writes 140 names of the kings of Egypt, but only 49 are recognizable when compared to relevant monuments and inscriptions. According to Wilson, over 40 kings of Israel and Judah are mentioned in the prophetic and historical books of the Bible, and all of these have been verified and found to be listed in the correct order when checked against historical records of the surrounding nations.

Another line of evidence supporting the historical reliability of the Old Testament is the usage of foreign words by biblical authors. The use of these words gives proof of the date and order of the documents. For example, early chapters of Genesis use a number of Babylonian words, while Egyptian words are used in the later chapters. Solomon's writings contain Indian and Assyrian words. During the time of the kings of Judah and Israel, one will notice a return to Assyrian and Babylonian terms. In addition, the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Chronicles introduce numerous Persian words into the Bible. The use of Aramaic in one verse in Jeremiah and half of Ezra and Daniel reflects the evidence that Aramaic was the common tongue in Western Asia, commonly used in business transactions at the time.

The use of different words and languages in the Old Testament is reflective of the nation that was in power in that day. It would be highly unlikely that the books of the Old Testament were written by authors at a later date than the events they describe, as some critics claim, for such writers would have been required to know the language and customs of that earlier time period. This information would have not been known (or available) to them centuries later, outside of the biblical testimony.³

Archaeological Discoveries Supporting the Reliability of Old Testament History

The following chart gives a summary of major discoveries that support or confirm the Old Testament's historical accounts.

Lachish Reliefs	In 1847, Austen Henry Layard discovered Assyrian king Sennacherib's palace wall relief in Nineveh, which depicted his siege of Lachish (Isaiah 36:1-2). This discovery was the first of its kind; it sent shock waves through England since it confirmed an event described in the Bible. Today, in southern Israel at Lachish, Sennacherib's earthen siege ramp is still visible!
Beth Shan	The biblical city of Beth Shan has been excavated since the 1920s and 1930s and has revealed an occupation beginning from approximately 4500 BC and extending to the eleventh century AD. It is the location where the bodies of King Saul and his sons were fastened on the city walls (1 Samuel 31:8-13) after their deaths in battle with the Philistines. The temple unearthed at the site also may be the Temple of Dagon, where Saul and Jonathan's armor and heads were exhibited (1 Chronicles 10:10). In addition, Beth Shan was also known as Scythopolis, one of the ten cities of the Decapolis (<i>deca</i> = ten; <i>polis</i> = city) in the first century AD. Today, nine of the ten cities of the Decapolis (Matthew 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31) have been positively identified. Many of them are in Jordan, including Philadelphia, Scythopolis, Damascus, Hippos, Raphana, Gadara, Pella, Abila, and Gerasa. The identification of the city of Dion (thought to be Tell el-Ashari) remains uncertain.
Kurkh Monolith Inscription	The stele inscription was discovered in the Turkish village of Kurkh. It was erected by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III to commemorate in part his victory at the battle of Qarqar, which is not mentioned in the Bible. The stele records the ninth-century BC battle in which Israel's king Ahab is mentioned to have contributed "2,000 chariots, 10,000 foot soldiers" to a military alliance.
Winged Bull of Sargon II	The Bible only mentions Sargon one time (Isaiah 20:1), and his name was unmentioned in any source outside the Bible, causing critics to question whether he even existed. However, while excavating what is now known as Sargon's Palace at Khorsabad in 1843, Paul-Emile Botta unearthed a massive 10-ton, 15-foot-high sculpture known as a <i>lamassu</i> (winged bull with human head) of Sargon II (722–705 BC). The text within the sculpture chronicles Sargon's capture of Samaria (Isaiah 20:6) and his title, ancestry, and achievements as king. One inscription reads, "I besieged and conquered Samaria. . . . I led away captive 27,280 people." After deporting the Israelites he imported other peoples into the area along with their religions. Because of this foreign influence in Samaria, by the time Jesus arrived in the first century the Jews and Samaritans were mortal enemies (John 4:9), in part because of the perceived impure genetic mixture and heretical religious beliefs.

Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III	<p>Discovered by A.H. Layard in the palace of Nimrud, this ninth-century BC obelisk illustrates the military victories of Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC). Worthy of note is that one panel depicts Jehu (or Joram) bowing before Shalmaneser III (not to be confused with Assyrian king Shalmaneser V, mentioned in 2 Kings 17:3-6) while making an alliance or paying tribute (2 Kings 8-10). The inscription reads, “Tribute of Yaua (Jehu or Joram), house of Omri, I received silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king, spears.”</p>
Ziggurat at Ur	<p>The remains of a massive ziggurat located at the biblical city of Ur (now Tell al-Muqayyar) were discovered in 1924 by Sir Leonard Woolley. This was a structure Abraham would have been familiar with (Genesis 11:1-9,27-29). Its discovery also supports the plausibility of the Tower of Babel events mentioned in Genesis 11:1-9.</p>
Royal Steward Inscription	<p>In 1870, Charles Clermont-Ganneau located a tomb lintel inscription in Jerusalem, adjacent to the Temple Mount near the Kidron Valley. The partial name inscribed on the lintel appears to be that of an eighth-century BC biblical figure named Shebna. According to the inscription, Shebna was the steward over the household of King Hezekiah. Isaiah mentions this man as living above his means and says he carved out a tomb for himself in a very conspicuous place (Isaiah 22:15-19). The words of the inscription implore passersby to not open the tomb since no silver or gold was contained inside.</p>
Cylinder of Nabonidus	<p>In 1854, as J.E. Taylor inspected the ancient ruins and ziggurat of the biblical city of Ur, he found four clay cuneiform cylinders written by Babylonian king Nabonidus (sixth century BC) that documented the history of the ziggurat and various renovations to buildings. Toward the end of the inscription, Nabonidus offers a prayer for long life for himself and his son Belshazzar! Daniel 5 records that King Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the wall that spelled his doom, and it was only Daniel who could translate the inscription.</p> <p>Prior to this discovery, critics thought the Bible was in error when referring to Belshazzar as “king” (Daniel 5:1), since no extrabiblical sources recorded him on the Babylonian kings list. Now we understand that Belshazzar was Nabonidus’s son; he was left in Babylon as a co-regent king since his father was away a great deal of the time. This also explains why Daniel could rise no higher than “third ruler” in the kingdom (Daniel 5:29)—Nabonidus and Belshazzar were king and co-regent respectively.</p>
Prayer of Nabonidus	<p>Interestingly, an Aramaic document was recovered from among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q242). It is now known as “The Prayer of Nabonidus.” The prayer was most likely copied from an older version of the work sometime during the first century BC. It is written in the first person and tells of Nabonidus’s affliction with an ulcer for seven years while he was at Tema.</p>

The prayer mentions that it was an exorcist—a *Jew from among the exiles of Judah*—who ultimately forgave his sins. He begins to recount the story of his approach to the gods and then the rest of the text is missing. At very least, we see here an independent corroboration of the books of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:10-12) and Daniel (Daniel 9:2), when they report that the Jews lived in Babylonian captivity during the sixth century BC. The prayer also provides a historical and social background consistent with the books of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

Royal Bricks

Several biblical kings have engaged in enormous building campaigns (for example, Nebuchadnezzar, as recorded in Daniel 4:30), leaving monuments and inscriptions to their achievements. The clay bricks used to build many of these structures contain either a stamp or handwritten inscription bearing the name of the builder. Archaeologists have located over a half-dozen kinds of these bricks, belonging to biblical kings such as Shalmaneser, Sargon, Esarhaddon, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, and others.

Ekron Inscription

In 1996, Seymour Gitin and Trude Dothan unearthed a seventh-century BC inscription at the Philistine city of Ekron that provided the names of two individuals, Achish and Padi, who served as kings of the city. First Samuel 21:11 and 27:2 tell of David fleeing from Saul and joining Achish, the king of Gath. Though the Achish of the Ekron inscription is not the same person as the Achish who lived earlier, during David's time, it shows a remarkable continuity of names that spans centuries within Philistine culture. The other individual mentioned in the Ekron inscription, Padi, is referred to several times in the Taylor Prism (Sennacherib's annals of his Judean military campaigns against Hezekiah in 701 BC) as the man Sennacherib established as a vassal king over Ekron.

The annals of Sennacherib also record that the inhabitants of Ekron surrendered Padi to Hezekiah since the Philistine remained loyal to the Assyrian vassalage. The annals tell of King Hezekiah placing Padi under arrest for a short time (between 705–701 BC) before he was reappointed as Assyria's vassal king by Sennacherib in Ekron. Though Padi is not mentioned in the Bible, the Ekron and Taylor Prism inscriptions offer us insight into the events behind the scenes during the time when King Hezekiah was confronted by the Assyrian war machine led by Sennacherib (2 Kings 18–19).

Azekah Inscription

Two tablets discovered in Nineveh contain the history of the Assyrian attack (either by Sargon II or Sennacherib) on the biblical city of Azekah (2 Chronicles 32:1-2, 21-22). The inscriptions describe in vivid terms the Assyrians' siege of the city and mention by name King Hezekiah as the individual who fortified Azekah. The tablets provide historical attestation to Hezekiah's existence and the Assyrian wars in Judah during the late eighth century BC, as the Bible records in 2 Kings 18-19 and 2 Chronicles 32.

Altar of
Jeroboam I

Excavations at Tell Dan (originally known as Laish) have revealed many fascinating features relating to the Old Testament times. These include the Tell Dan Stele, which for the first time in modern history provided an extrabiblical mention of the “house of David”; the oldest intact mud-brick gate structure yet found, which dates to the time of the patriarchs (Middle Bronze Age); and one of two altars established by Jeroboam I in Dan and Bethel. This place of worship, discovered by archaeologist Avraham Biran, included a golden calf. The Bible reports it was instituted by Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:25-31) as a substitute location of worship (instead of Jerusalem) for those living in the northern ten tribes of Israel. Jeroboam’s negative religious reforms included acting as high priest himself, allowing unqualified persons to serve as priests, and changing the date of the Feast of Tabernacles (1 Kings 12:31-33).

The Weld-
Blundell Prism

In 1922, English archaeologist Herbert Weld-Blundell led an expedition to Larsa (Iraq), where he discovered an ancient clay prism containing a list of Sumerian kings who ruled from 3200 BC to 1800 BC. The text makes reference to the kings who ruled “before the flood” and “after the flood.” What is more, the list supports the Genesis account by describing extremely long life spans prior to the Flood (Genesis 5:27) and reduced life spans afterward. The four-sided prism is written in the Old Akkadian cuneiform language and currently resides in the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Oxford. Nearly two dozen other archaeological and literary finds from various ethnic groups also attest to a catastrophic flood that destroyed mankind except for a surviving family or individual. The prism’s extraordinary parallel with the Genesis account of Noah and the Flood (Genesis 6–9) adds independent corroboration to the historicity of the event.

Ras Shamra
Tablets

In 1928, a farmer (Brahim) in northern Syria accidentally discovered a vault in his field. Later this area would be known as Ras Shamra due to the expedition and excavation led by F.A. Schaeffer and George Chenet. Then in 1929, archaeologists unearthed a scribal school and library adjoining a temple. The fifteenth-century BC tablets found at the location contained a script previously unknown to scholars, but it soon would be understood to be Canaanite, a language similar to Hebrew. The tablets describe the dark religious practices of the Canaanite peoples indigenous to the land prior to Joshua’s conquest. These wicked practices offer confirmation of the deities, practices, laws, and religious beliefs and customs of the heathen described in the Old Testament, which include 1) the burying alive of children, 2) child sacrifice of other kinds, 3) male and female religious prostitution, 4) the malice and jealousy among the gods, 5) absence of morality among the gods, and 6) idol worship among others.

Moreover, these tablets have provided an answer to the critical argument that denied the possibility of Moses writing a sophisticated religious law code as early as 1440 to 1400 BC. In addition, the Ras Shamra tablets have contributed

to our understanding of the development of the Hebrew script from about 1500 BC to the modern day. This discovery has also dealt a blow to negative higher critics who asserted that Aramaic words included in Moses' writings did not develop until after the exile to Babylon (sixth century BC). Several Aramaisms were found in the Ugaritic texts, which are contemporary with Moses, which refutes this notion.

The Madaba Map

Originally obscured in an earthquake in the eighth century AD, a Greek mosaic floor map was accidentally rediscovered during the construction of a Greek Orthodox church in 1884. Currently, the map is located on the floor of the St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Madaba, Jordan. It lists the names of important biblical cities and landmarks, including Jerusalem, and their orientation in relation to various geographical features such as the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. Dating to the mid sixth century AD, it remains the oldest surviving map of the Holy Land. Its value has been confirmed by archaeologists, who utilize it to locate places of interest. For example, the central *Cardo* thoroughfare with its pillars and road in Jerusalem, the Damascus Gate, the Nea Church, and the location of Ashkelon were found to be in the exact locations described by the map.

Nuzi Tablets

In the early twentieth century, American archaeologists began excavating Nuzi (in northern Iraq), a developed Hurrian administrative center first settled around 3000 BC. Here, they discovered archives containing thousands of clay cuneiform tablets (dated to 1500 to 1350 BC) that record various social institutions, religious codes, family records, inheritance rights, marriage arrangements, birthrights, and so on. Contradicting critics' claims that Genesis was written at a much later time, the texts describe practices similar to those recorded in Genesis 15–31, including 1) the sale of birthrights (Genesis 25:29–34); 2) the choosing of a surrogate wife by a barren wife (Genesis 16:5); 3) laws of sistership (Genesis 20:12; 26:7); 4) inheritance of personal belongings; 5) adoption of slaves; 6) marriage arrangements; 7) deathbed blessings (Genesis 27; 48); 7) the care for children and surrogate mothers (Genesis 21); and 8) how a family's name is carried on when no genetic heir is found (Genesis 15:2).

The practices described in these tablets may explain why Abraham was reluctant to expel Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:10–11), and why Abraham adopted a slave (Eliezer), relative or freeborn, to care for him in his elderly years, carry on his name, and inherit his possessions (Genesis 15:2–4; 24). The Nuzi texts' close parallel to the cultural practices of the patriarchs confirm that the Genesis narratives are historical because they fit the cultural practices of their time. Furthermore, the archives at Nuzi confirm that written records pertaining to family were faithfully kept through the centuries.

Ebla Tablets

By the early 1970s, excavations conducted in northern Syria at Tell-Mardikh had yielded more than 15,000 clay tablets that provided scholars with additional knowledge of an otherwise unknown empire called *Ebla*. The Ebla tablets, dating to 2300 BC, provided researchers with early and rare information of the language, religion, geography, culture, and customs of the patriarchal period, roughly spanning the time from 3300 to 1600 BC.

Previous to this discovery, critical scholars argued that many of the words used in the Genesis stories were developed late, long after the stories Genesis describes, and therefore the text could not have been written any earlier than around 700 BC. However, the tablets changed this critical climate when it was recognized that the patriarchal narratives found in Genesis accurately utilized or reflected many of the words, names, customs, and locations found in the earlier Ebla tablets. This eliminates the notion of late word origination and supports Genesis as accurately reflecting the ancient world prior to 700 BC. In addition, personal names, locations, and deities found in the tablets are also mentioned in Genesis and the Old Testament. Names such as Adam, Ishmael, Israel, and Eber, as well as locations such as Megiddo, Hazor, Gaza, Dor, Zared, Nahor, Shechem, and Jerusalem, and deities such as Dagon, El, Baal, Molech, Ya, and others, are consistent with the accounts of Genesis and the Old Testament and buttress their historical reliability.

Chart © Joseph M. Holden, 2013.

Conclusion

While an exhaustive study of the reliability of the Old Testament is outside the scope of this chapter,* we have considered some of the most salient objections. Still other issues, such as the historicity of Daniel or problems confronting morality, could be considered; but the foregoing examples have served, we believe, as helpful case studies for showing that critical objections usually have some initial appeal, but upon further scrutiny they do not hold up.⁴

* For a more exhaustive study and a passage-by-passage assessment of Bible difficulties for both the Old and the New Testaments, we refer the reader to Norman L. Geisler and Thomas A. Howe, *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992).