

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

There are fewer disciplines more fascinating than archaeology of the ancient Near East, especially as it touches upon the stories of the Bible. This is because archaeology often brings clarity to the biblical people, places, and events described in the unfolding drama of God’s redemption of mankind. Although professional archaeologists remain locked in debate about the role, method, and language of “biblical” archaeology, archaeology and its findings enjoy growing popularity among the laity and armchair archaeologists. This is primarily due to recent successes in unearthing artifacts and cities relating to the stories of the Bible.

Today, nearly 100 biblical figures, dozens of biblical cities, over 60 historical details in the Gospel of John, and 80 historical details in the book of Acts, among other things, have been confirmed as historical through archaeological and historical research. Moreover, the Israeli Antiquities Authority has over 100,000 artifacts (discovered in Israel since 1948) available on their database for perusal. How familiar are you with these finds? Archaeology has been an indispensable tool in the historian’s tool kit as well as an aid to the Christian apologist in defending the message of the Christian faith.

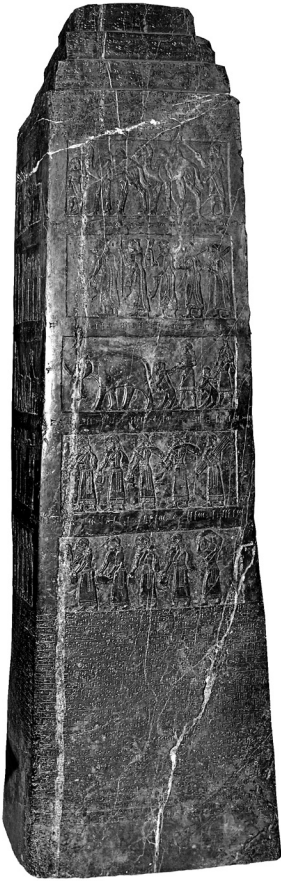
Archaeology as Biblical “Proof”

Some cite various archaeological finds as “proof” that a particular event really occurred, or that a city or person mentioned in the Bible actually existed. However, the purpose of this book is not to “prove” the



The Roman Corinthian columns of the Temple of Hercules located in Amman, Jordan, at Citadel Hill archaeological park, are a vivid reminder of the ancient cities known to us in Scripture as the Decapolis (*deca* = ten; *polis* = city). Amman has been identified as the city of Philadelphia. These ten cities were centers of Greek and Roman culture located east and west of the Jordan River (Mark 5:18-20; 7:31-35).

stories of the Bible, but rather to show that the narratives of Scripture are historically reliable and consistent with what has been discovered through various excavations and historical research. With this said, there are traditionally two main approaches to whether archaeology offers confirmation of the Bible.



This ninth-century BC obelisk illustrates the military victories of Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC). One panel depicts the king of Northern Israel, Jehu (or Joram), bowing before Shalmaneser III, making an alliance or paying tribute (see 2 Kings 8–10). The inscription includes the phrase, “Tribute of Yaua [Jehu or Joram], house of Omri.” (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

Introducing the Minimalists

First, some of the more critical scholars are known as *minimalists* and in some cases *revisionists*. They see very little or no historical correspondence between the archaeological data and the biblical text. That is, the Bible is not a reliable source for reconstructing the past. This movement began in the 1980s and 1990s among mostly European scholars in London and Denmark, who questioned the real existence of David and Solomon and whether there actually was a united monarchy; they further questioned the existence of Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses and the Exodus, and Joshua and his conquests.²

For the minimalists and their literature,* much of the debate centered on the historicity of David. He was assumed to be a myth, and the existence of the united monarchy in the tenth century BC was considered doubtful. However, this thinking was dealt a setback when in 1993 Avraham Biran of Hebrew Union College discovered a ninth-century BC Aramaic inscription at Tel Dan (northern Israel). The inscription contained a statement (written by an enemy of Israel) referring to a king of the “House of David” (*byt-dwd*). This discovery, along with others such as the Mesha Stele, which contained the same phrase (*byt-dwd*) and excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa on the Israelite/Philistine border, demonstrated the historicity of David’s dynasty and that the southern kingdom of Judah arose between 1100 and 1000 BC. These facts effectively ended the debate of David’s historicity and attempts by minimalists to change the dating of the monarchy to the much later Hellenistic period.

In addition, further research into the historicity of Moses has revealed that the names, deities, descriptions of culture, daily life, customs, and language he

* The leading advocates among the minimalists are Thomas Thompson (*Early History of the Israelite People*—1992), Niels Peter Lemche (*Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*—1988), and Israel Finkelstein (*The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*—2001).

recorded in Genesis and Exodus are consistent with what we know about ancient Egypt and its literature. Bear in mind that responses from conservative scholars regarding the historicity of the Exodus have revealed very little archaeological evidence for it. However, one would not expect to find building structures and permanent artifacts associated with a mobile (nomadic) people group such as the Israelites. We must beware of the fallacy of arguing from silence. Just because little evidence has been found does not mean the Exodus did not occur, or that evidence will not be found in the future. The historicity of Abraham was also denied by the minimalists. However, early- and late-twentieth-century excavations in Mesopotamia have offered strong support for the correspondence of the archaeological data and the Genesis record. These include descriptions of people and places, financial climate, documented names such as “Abraham,” treaties, and customs.³

Furthermore, minimalist challenges were made to the biblical account of Joshua’s conquest of Canaan. These arguments were mostly supported by Kathleen Kenyon’s research of Jericho in the 1950s. She concluded that Jericho did not exist by the time Joshua reached the Promised Land in the thirteenth century BC.⁴ The Jericho she discovered had fortified walls that were burnt, and most likely existed in the sixteenth century BC—far too early for Joshua to conquer. However, archaeologist Bryant Wood has recently (1990) countered Kenyon’s findings with a detailed analysis of pottery and an examination of stratigraphy (rich material layers of occupation), which have shown the walls of Jericho to have collapsed as described in Joshua 6:20-24.⁵ What is more, abundant stores of unused grain indicate a short springtime siege as Judges 2:6 and 6:15-20 imply. Wood’s analysis of previous excavations of Jericho (by Garstang and Kenyon) has yielded a date of c. 1400 BC for its destruction, which is consistent with the biblical account of the conquest.

The Minimalists and the Use of the Bible

In addition to their theological assumptions, Minimalists have led a campaign among professional archaeologists to abandon the term *biblical archaeology* altogether for the more “scientific”-sounding term *Near-Eastern archaeology*. Their contempt for any title associated with the Bible appears to be driven by its perceived association to biased research, antiquated methodology, rigid ideology, lack of objectivity, and contempt for the scientific method. (However, this notion seems to be shortsighted since it requires archaeologists to discriminate against the Bible as a valid primary-source document originating from the ancient Near-Eastern world.)

More specifically, the minimalists’ aversion involves a distaste for those archaeologists who initially consult the Bible in order to locate lost cities or to test various hypotheses. It is said that the Bible should be consulted *after* another Near-Eastern text first mentions the topic under investigation or the location in question is excavated. Otherwise, they say the biblical archaeologist will “see” what he or she wants to see in the data. Certainly, there is always a risk of unhealthy bias in anything we evaluate, and we must guard against it, but unfortunately, these objections fail to realize that one must discriminate against the Bible (which is itself a bias!) as a legitimate text in order to operate this way. Surely, an archaeologist will (and does) consult ancient extrabiblical texts in order to form a hypothesis. They will not always wait for a second source to confirm the first

text's information before proceeding. Biblical archaeologists believe there is no problem with first consulting the Bible for information prior to excavating, since the data that is subsequently unearthed must also be analyzed, processed, and published with peer review. Therefore, it does not appear unreasonable for the biblical archaeologist to proceed based on a preliminary analysis of the biblical text, especially if it offers crucial information. In fact, some may consider it irresponsible to proceed without consultation of the relevant biblical material. What is more, the biblical archaeologist adheres to the same generally accepted principles of excavation as do all other Near-Eastern archaeologists, meaning there is no need to be bibliophobic.

The Minimalists' Rejection of Religion

In other cases, the critical archaeologist (and Bible scholar) will reject the Bible as a trustworthy source of historical information since they contend it is a *religious* book about *religion*, written by *religious* people with *religious* purposes; therefore, it cannot be trusted to contain objective information. There are several reasons why this thinking is flawed.

First, to reject information, research, and conclusions because of the source commits the genetic fallacy (a perceived defect in the *origin* of a claim or thing is taken to be evidence that discredits the claim or thing itself). This means we would have to reject all archaeological finds that were inspired by and sourced in the Bible. In addition, this kind of fallacious logic means we would have to reject the model of the benzene molecule, since it was inspired by Friedrich August Kekule's vision of a snake biting its tail. Or what do we make of Nikolai Tesla's idea for the alternating-current motor, which he obtained by a vision while reading a pantheistic poet? Has any philosopher rejected Socrates or his works found in Plato because Socrates' philosophy was inspired by a Greek prophetess?

Second, to reject something because of its religious source confuses the nature of how archaeologists *perceive* and *receive* data. Certainly, any archaeologist can perceive and examine the Bible from a detached, objective, and academic perspective much like a geology professor studies rocks. Even though rocks are religious objects to some, it does not mean we cannot be objective about geology. That is, their *perceiving* the data does not necessarily mean archaeologists *receive* the religious message contained in it.

Third, since all ancient and modern people (including archaeologists) have a religious view, whether they believe in a deity or not (even atheism offers a religious perspective about God), *no* evaluation of the archaeological data would be valid or true.

Fourth, to reject a source because it's religious unfairly discriminates against people of faith in favor of nonreligious positions, assuming the former cannot be objective. In fact, people of faith have contributed in all areas of research including science, biology, art, astronomy, archaeology, philosophy, theology, mathematics, and other fields. Most early scientists approached their studies from religious belief, in most cases through the doctrine of Christianity. These include Kepler (physical astronomy), Pascal (hydrostatics), Boyle (chemistry), Steno (stratigraphy), Newton (calculus, gravitation), Faraday (magnetic theory), Babbage (computer science), Mendel (genetics), Maxwell (electrodynamics), and Pasteur (bacteriology)—among others whose motivation to analyze the natural world was the natural byproduct of a belief in a creator.

Fifth, to reject the reliability of the Bible because it is a religious book destroys the

trustworthiness of many ancient Near-Eastern artifacts and literary works; most of them contain religious pronouncements and references to their gods. In fact, we could not consult with any degree of reliability most Egyptian, Babylonian, Hebrew, and Persian archaeological data since most refer to divine actions and belief in pagan deities.

Sixth, if we are to eliminate an object of religious commitment such as the Bible from informing us of history, then we must also set aside artifacts such as idols, religious figurines, altars, and temples and their contribution to understanding the ancient past. Even European art that depicts religious scenes would have to be eliminated since in most cases it was created by people of faith. (One would have to assume the painters were not objective in their painting and therefore could not properly reflect reality.)

Seventh, a rejection of the Bible in archaeological research would in some cases eliminate the *only* data archaeologists possess about a historical event or person. This was the case when scholars had no extrabiblical evidence of Belshazzar (Daniel 5) and David (1 and 2 Samuel); these men were later confirmed through archaeological discoveries in the twentieth century. Time and again the Bible has proven its value in archaeological research.



Originally damaged in an earthquake in the eighth century AD, a Greek mosaic floor map showing portions of Israel, Egypt, and Syria was accidentally discovered 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 (pictured here), and their orientation in proximity to various geographical features such as the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. It remains the oldest surviving map of the Holy Land, dating to the mid sixth century AD. The value of the map has been confirmed by archaeologists, who utilize its descriptions to locate places of interest. For example, the picture above depicts, in Jerusalem, the central *Cardo* thoroughfare with its pillars and road, the Damascus Gate, and the Nea Church. Other locations such as Ashkelon were found to be in the exact location described by the map. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The Maximalists

Those of the second view are known as *maximalists*. These individuals see sufficient correspondence between the archaeological data and the Bible. The biblical text is viewed as a reliable source for reconstructing the past. This group generally assumes that recent digs at ancient Near-Eastern sites confirm the historical narratives recorded in the Bible. For instance, they affirm the historicity of David and Solomon, Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses and the Exodus, and Joshua's conquest of Canaan.

For the maximalist, the Bible is viewed as primary-source literature able to convey helpful information pertaining to customs, cultures, people, ambient life, and the location of cities in the ancient Near East. Some view the archaeological data as strong direct "proof" of the biblical stories; others see a "consistency" or "correspondence," which many believe is the minimal requirement for giving the historical narratives of the Bible the benefit of the doubt. Any archaeologist would agree that there are many difficulties confronting our understanding of the archaeological data, though the maximalist would see few or no contradictions with the biblical record. For the maximalist, the degree of historical certainty is beyond reasonable doubt. As an *origin* science (or sometimes called a *forensic* science), archaeology is viewed as a discipline that offers a collection and review of the material data similar to how a crime-scene investigation is conducted. In some cases, the scientist's findings have the potential and convincing power that allows one to render a verdict about what occurred in the past.

Archaeology and the Bible

The Bible itself is an archaeological document that represents the most complete and substantiated corpus of literature we possess from the ancient world. As we saw in part 1, no other piece of ancient literature comes close to the amount of manuscript attestation necessary for its accurate reconstruction in modern language. Furthermore, the dates between the original writing of the books of the Bible (known as the *autographa*) and their oldest surviving manuscript copies have the least amount of time gap of any piece of literature from the ancient world. This is crucial for archaeology, since the more time that has elapsed between the writing of the original text and the surviving manuscript copy, the greater the possibility that myth and embellishment will be found in the copied text. It is for this reason (that is, the number of manuscripts and their early dating) that many archaeologists confidently scan the biblical text for various clues in their research. The logic of archaeology and its relationship to the Bible becomes clear: If the Bible is marginalized or altogether removed from the archaeological endeavor, one must also marginalize or remove *all* other extrabiblical literature and inscriptions from this same time period due to their weaker textual support. This is not a price most institutions of higher learning should, nor be willing to, pay.

Although the biblical record does not exhaustively document the many cultures, customs, and events of the ancient Near East, it offers us a needed glimpse into this time period. Archaeology can aid how we understand the Bible. For example, the original biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) form the linguistic contents of Scripture. However, they are foreign to our modern Western world. The discovery of various extrabiblical

inscriptions and literary texts have aided us in clarifying, confirming, and in some cases correcting our understanding of the linguistic meaning and context of the Scriptures.

Such correction occurred in several cases where the Gospel writer Luke was previously thought to be in error. For instance, in Acts 17:6 he described the rulers at Thessalonica with the Greek term *politarcho*. It was thought that since no extrabiblical Greek literature used the term, Luke was mistaken. However, after the discovery of an inscription dating to the first century AD at Thessalonica that used the word *politarcho* in reference to the rulers of the ancient city, there was no longer a debate as to the reliability of Luke's account of those rulers. Through the immense help that archaeology offers, we soon discover that all ancient history directly or indirectly relates in some way to the narrative found in the biblical text. No longer may we safely assert there is an unbroken wall between "secular" and the "sacred." History is all *His*-story.