

PART SIX

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT



Archaeological Evidence and the Bible

Archaeology of the Old Testament offers us many benefits, such as the ability to clarify and illuminate past events, understand customs and cultures, and historically confirm people and places mentioned in Scripture. As noted in part 5, liberal scholarship has traditionally dismissed the Bible's narratives if they did not have extrabiblical support such as an inscription, literature, or an artifact. Moreover, some scholars (both liberal and evangelical) have allowed extrabiblical materials to determine the historicity of a given passage.

Both approaches appear to unfairly marginalize the Bible, making it a second-class source, while simultaneously elevating extrabiblical materials and literature as primary sources. We must not forget that the Bible is the strongest and most reliably supported piece of literature from the ancient world in terms of its transmission (copy accuracy), number of manuscripts and their early dates, as well as being a historical document itself. Near-Eastern historian Edwin Yamauchi emphasizes the commonness of this fallacy among scholars in his book *The Stones and the Scriptures* (1972).¹ According to Yamauchi, the fallacy in thinking here is reflected in the notion that one cannot believe the biblical narratives unless there is corroborating material evidence sourced outside of Scripture. Though consistency between the two



The Gemariah seal impression was discovered at the City of David. Its paleo-Hebrew inscription reads, "Belonging to Gemaryahu [Gemariah] [son of] Shaphan." Gemariah and Shaphan are mentioned in the books of Jeremiah (36:10-12,25) and 2 Kings (22:3). Shaphan was the scribe under King Jehoiakim. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

domains (that is, external sources and the Bible) is desirable, it has been made by some to be a *necessary precondition of historicity*.

Those who have adopted this latter approach display a presupposition of biblical skepticism from the outset. This is seen in cases where earlier external evidence (for example, an inscription) is found to overlap a later biblical text. There are occasions when discrepancies between the two sources are discovered and subsequently a later biblical narrative is discarded and the external source is upheld as reflecting earlier, accurate history.

However, Yamauchi correctly notes that one cannot simply demand external corroboration of sources due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence and the *king's vanity* (that is, distortion or exaggeration) often present in earlier ancient inscriptions. Only a fraction of the archaeological evidence has *survived* the ravages of time and then been *surveyed, excavated, examined, and published*, according to Yamauchi. Therefore, the demand for corroboration in every instance does not appear reasonable or productive. For example, there are many cases in which biblical persons had no corroboration until recent times. Among these are Pontius Pilate (first external corroboration discovered in 1961), Herod the Great (1965), and the Roman governor Felix (1966). It seems best to assume the Bible is historically reliable until evidence beyond reasonable doubt shows otherwise.

Dealing with the Lack of Data

Scholars who demand corroboration prior to determining historicity have essentially engaged in an argument from silence. That is to say, they will not affirm the historicity of a biblical narrative because the historical record is silent on the issue. We must remember a fundamental principle: *The lack of archaeological data relating to the Bible is not evidence against the historicity of the Bible*. There is no guarantee that future excavations will not turn up corroborating evidence. Successful discoveries, some mentioned earlier in this book, have put to rest numerous debates concerning the historical nature of many biblical passages. These include discoveries relating to the existence of the Hittite civilization, Solomon, David, Balaam, Canaanites, and numerous biblical cities mentioned in Scripture, to name a few.

Archaeology also has its limitations. Although it deals with artifacts, features, measurements, and tangible data, archaeology also involves many interpretive judgments and probabilities. Any interpretations and conclusions must be considered in light of human fallibility and the sparse nature of the data itself. As mentioned above, this is compounded by the fact that only a small amount of the evidence has survived and can be either isolated or disconnected from its in-situ environment. Floods,

fires, warfare, natural deterioration, burial, temperature, political climate and time, have all collaborated to make the discovery of biblical artifacts difficult. Therefore, archaeology cannot be classified as an “exact” science; but neither can any empirical science for that matter. Despite its limitations, archaeology is governed by generally accepted principles and methods as a forensic science and is a valuable tool in uncovering the past. Therefore, archaeology has become an indispensable discipline in the historian’s tool belt to unearth data supporting the historical reliability of the Bible beyond a reasonable doubt.

Archaeology of the Old Testament

There are a greater number of artifacts that correspond to the Old Testament than those relating to the New Testament. This is not because archaeologists have been unsuccessful in locating New Testament sites, but because the storyline of the Old Testament has a much longer history to cover and for which to accumulate material remains (2500 BC to 400 BC) than does the New Testament (7 BC to AD 100). Naturally, the Old Testament narratives offer more data to process and evaluate. Moreover, the Old Testament communities tended to use permanent materials, such as stone, which gave the artifact a greater chance to survive through the centuries of erosion. In addition, the older remains have been buried and preserved more securely than the more recent New Testament materials, which are nearer the surface. By the time the New Testament arrived, much writing was committed to more easily perishable substances like papyrus, which made for easier transport and storage.

There is a growing confidence among many ancient Near-Eastern archaeologists today in the historical nature of many of the cities, people, and stories mentioned in the Old Testament. For example, 50 years ago it was not uncommon for Near-Eastern scholars to suggest that there were over 25,000 sites dating to Old Testament times that had been identified.² However, today archaeologists have continued to locate remains from biblical times—a number that should increase anyone’s confidence in the descriptions of customs and cultures mentioned in Scripture. This



The base of an olive press is visible in the tenth-century BC ruins of the Philistine city of Gath (Tel es-Safi), Goliath’s hometown. In approximately 830 BC the city was destroyed by the Aramean king Hazael (2 Kings 12:17), and later conquered by Nebuchadnezzar II on his way to Jerusalem.

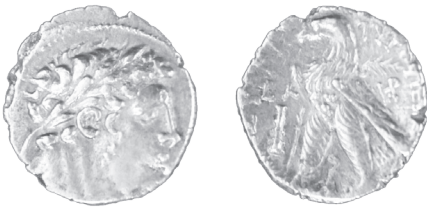
is primarily due to past and recent excavations that are unearthing biblical places such as the Temple Mount Walls and administrative buildings (under Benjamin Mazar and Leen Ritmeyer), the City of David (under Eilat Mazar), the Philistine city of Gath (under Aren Maeir), Sodom (under Steven Collins), Ai (under Bryant Wood), Hazor (under Yigael Yadin), Jericho (under Kathleen Kenyon), Qumran (under Roland de Vaux), and the Pool of Siloam (under Eli Shukron and Ronny Reich) among others, not to mention the Temple Mount Sifting Project (under Gabriel Barkay). Today, all the major biblical cities and geographical features have been located, including Jerusalem, Jericho, the Sea of Galilee, the Galilee region, the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, Caesarea, Dan, Caesarea Philippi, Beth Shan, Gezer, Hazor, Beersheba, Megiddo, Memphis, Alexandria, Luxor, Thebes, Babylon, Nineveh, Athens, Thessalonica, Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, Smyrna, and dozens more.³

Currently, there are approximately 60 biblical figures in the Old Testament that have been identified through historical and archaeological research. These include Nebuchadnezzar II, Belshazzar, Sennacherib, Darius, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I, Cyrus, Jeroboam, Baruch the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah, Shema the servant of Jeroboam II, David, Solomon, Balaam, and many other kings of Israel and Judea, among others.

Along with these finds comes an increased awareness of the ancient past, and a more informed reconstruction of the people and places of

the Bible. However, the discoveries of inscriptions, coins, literature, architectural features, and the like, offer the archaeologist greater challenges in deciphering how these pieces fit together in biblical and extrabiblical history. The reason for this is that in every excavation there is data collected that has to do with the peoples, places, and events that surround the biblical story line, though they

are not necessarily mentioned in the Bible. There have been no contradictions demonstrated thus far, though many difficulties indeed remain. This part of the book is dedicated to assisting our readers in understanding some of the more crucial artifacts and remains that have a more direct bearing on validating the historical reliability of the Old Testament.



Front and back view of a first-century AD silver Tyre shekel. Judas would have received 30 of these coins after betraying Jesus.