

What Good Is Archaeology?

If you were to go to any major university to study the Bible, you would probably be told that historical events in the Bible are to be treated as myths, legends, and folklore. We need to have confidence in the Bible. Archaeology can help with that confidence.

The word archaeology is composed of two Greek words: Archaios, meaning “old” or “ancient”; and Logos, signifying “word, treatise or study.” A literal definition is “the study of antiquity.” It is the science which deduces a knowledge of past times from the study of existing remains. The earliest known archaeologist was Nabonidus, king of Babylon, who, in the sixth century B.C., excavated a temple floor down to a foundation stone laid 3,200 years before. Modern archaeology began with Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt (1798), when one of his officers discovered the Rosetta Stone, whose identical inscription in three languages unlocked the mystery of Egyptian hieroglyphs and opened the history of Egypt. Later a British officer named Henry Rawlinson found a trilingual inscription at Behistun, Persia, that unlocked the mysteries of cuneiform. Since 1948, archaeology has been concerned with the scientific study of the actual culture of people in the Bible.

There are several reasons why it is helpful to study archaeology. First, archaeology helps us to put the Bible story in context with a larger historical background. Second, it helps us illustrate allusions to contemporary religious practices. Third, it helps us to be sure that we have an accurate translation of the Bible. Fourth, archaeology helps us to understand the words of that text. Fifth, it helps us to see comparable literary forms. Sixth, archaeology shows us how to illustrate the historical accuracy of the Bible.

Old Testament history is full of archaeological discoveries which have helped confirm the accounts of the Bible. Norman Geisler said, “While many have doubted the accuracy of the Bible, time and continued research have consistently demonstrated that the word of God is better informed than its critics.” The role which archaeology is performing in New Testament research in expediting scientific study, balancing critical theory, illustrating, elucidating, supplementing, and authenticating historical and cultural backgrounds is also extremely helpful. F. F. Bruce said, “For the most part the service which archaeology has rendered to New Testament studies is the filling in of the contemporary background, against which we can read the record with enhanced comprehension and appreciation. And this background is a first century background.”

As an example of the benefits of archaeology, consider the Book of Mormon. It purports to portray the rise and development of two great civilizations. There are 38 cities catalogued in the Book of Mormon, evidence that these were indeed mighty civilizations which should, by all the laws of archaeological research into the culture of antiquity, have left vast amounts of “finds” to be evaluated. However, this has not been the case. The Mormons have yet to explain the fact that leading archaeological researchers not only have repudiated the claims of the Book of Mormon as to the existence of these civilizations, but have adduced considerable evidence to show the impossibility of the accounts given in the Mormon Bible.

Even though archaeology has never contradicted the Bible, a word of caution is necessary. All too often we hear the statement, "Archaeology proves the Bible." Archaeology cannot "prove" the Bible, if by this you mean "proves it to be inspired and revealed by God." However, if by "prove" one means "shows some biblical event or passage to be historical," then archaeology does prove the Bible. Furthermore, archaeology can confirm events but it cannot tell us why. Millar Burrows wrote that archaeology "can tell us a great deal about the topography of a military campaign. It can tell us nothing about the nature of God."

Archaeology is of great help in better understanding the Bible, in dealing with critical questions regarding the Bible, and in gaining an appreciation of the ancient world. This type of study is very faith-building. It assures us that the Bible is not legend and myth; it is history!

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