

A Study Of Biblical Archaeology

Introduction. 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, a relative newcomer among the physical sciences, has provided dramatic confirmation of the Bible's accuracy.

I. An Introduction To Archaeology

A. What is archaeology?

1. 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."
 - a) In modern times it is a highly scientific discipline, a branch of history that works with the unwritten material remains of antiquity.
 - (1) Archaeology is very different from most of modern science. The basic premise of an experience in modern science is that if it is repeatable, then it must be true.
 - (2) Archaeology, on the other hand, cannot possibly repeat its results. It can only give conjectures — not firm conclusions — concerning its finds, unless there is another outside confirmation by means of a test or other report. This is where archaeology takes on a unique twist.
 - b) In addition to excavation, archaeology includes geographical regional surveys, geological analyses, evaluation of artifacts, translation of inscriptions, reconstruction of architecture, examination of human remains, identification of art forms, and construction of ceramic pottery typology for chronological purposes.
2. Many archaeological discoveries revolve around the excavation of a "tell" (Arabic for "small hill"). A "tell" is an artificial mound formed by the accumulated remains of ancient settlements. There are about 5,000 tells known in Israel today but only 30 have been excavated in a major way.
 - a) Stratigraphy is the process of systematically excavating and analyzing the layers of debris that accumulates at inhabited sites over the centuries.
 - b) At some tells in modern Israel and the West Bank, as many as 30 different layers have been discovered, containing the debris of successive cities over a period of 3,000 years or more.

B. The benefits of archaeology.

1. There are several reasons why it is helpful to study archaeology.

- a) It helps us to put the Bible narrative in context with a larger historical background.
 - b) It helps us understand allusions to past religious practices.
 - c) It helps us to be sure that we have an accurate translation of the Bible.
 - d) It helps us to understand the words of that text.
 - e) It helps us to see comparable literary forms.
 - f) It helps us illustrate the historical accuracy of the Bible.
2. Some of the greatest modern scholars have a deep-seated belief in the benefits of archaeology.
- a) Nelson Glueck said, "It is worth emphasizing that in all this work no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a single, properly understood biblical statement."
 - b) W. F. Albright added, "The excessive skepticism shown toward the Bible by important historical schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certain phases of which still appear periodically, has been progressively discredited. Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history."
 - c) Millar Burrows observes, "On the whole, archaeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the scriptural record. More than one archaeologist has found his respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine."
3. As an example of the benefits of archaeology, consider the Book of Mormon.
- a) 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.
 - b) 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.
- C. The limitations of archaeology.
1. 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. For instance, archaeology can tell us a great deal about the topography of a military campaign. It can tell us nothing about the nature of God.

2. Cautions about archaeology.

a) All archaeologists have their particular bias, just like everyone else.

(1) Whenever historical accounts of the Bible are called in question on the basis of alleged disagreement with the findings of archaeology or the testimony of ancient non-Hebrew documents, always remember that the Bible is itself an archaeological document of the highest caliber.

(2) Pagan kings practiced propaganda, just as their modern counterparts do; and it is naive to suppose that simply because a statement was written in Assyrian cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphics it was more trustworthy and factual than the word of God composed in Hebrew.

b) No other ancient document in the B.C. period affords so many clear proofs of accuracy and integrity as does the Old Testament; so it is a violation of the rules of evidence to assume that the Bible statement is wrong every time it disagrees with a secular inscription or manuscript of some sort. Of all the documents known to man, only the scriptures have certified their accuracy and divine authority by a pattern of prediction and fulfillment completely beyond the capabilities of man.

c) One must remember that archaeological evidence is fragmentary. It comprises only a tiny fraction of all that has occurred.

(1) Edwin Yamauchi writes, “Historians of antiquity, in using the archaeological evidence have very often failed to realize how slight is the evidence at our disposal. It would not be exaggerating to point out that what we have is but one fraction of a second fraction of a third fraction of a fourth fraction of a fifth fraction of the possible evidence.”

(2) Therefore, the discovery of more evidence can change the picture considerably.

(a) This is especially true when conclusions have been based on silence — a lack of existing evidence.

(b) Many critical views about the Bible have been overturned by archaeological discoveries.

II. Old Testament Archaeology

A. The ancient flood.

1. Accounts of a massive flood are found in many cultures around the world. The Gilgamesh Epic (the saga of an ancient Babylonian king, Gilgamesh) includes an expanded flood story on Tablet 11, similar to the flood story in Genesis 6-9. The best known copy of the Epic was found at Nineveh on a series of baked clay tablets.
2. Tablet 11 of the Gilgamesh Epic tells of a great flood brought upon the earth by the wrath of gods and includes a hero who is told to build a ship, to take every kind of animal along and to use birds to check if the water had receded.
3. Copies of the Epic and other flood stories have been found in the Near East. The popularity of the flood theme argues for its historicity and supports the flood of Noah's time.

B. Boghazkoy, the Hittite capital.

1. The ancient, large capital city of the Hittites has been recovered about 90 miles east of Ankara, Turkey. The rule of the Hittites extended to Syria and Lebanon.
2. Although the Hittites are mentioned 48 times in the Old Testament, almost nothing was known about them until modern times. One hundred years ago, critics thought the Hittites were an imaginary people made up by the biblical authors.
3. Finding the Hittite empire forced that claim to be withdrawn and supported the biblical record. The find also helps explain the language, history and literature of people who appear and rule in the Old Testament.

C. Pithom and Raamses.

1. According to Exodus 1, the Hebrews were slaves in the Egyptian cities of Pithom and Raamses before the Exodus. The Egyptians forced the Hebrews to make bricks, both with and without straw (Exodus 1:14; 5:7-19).
2. The location of Raamses is now associated with Qantir (Tell el-Dab'a). Pithom was within the Wadi Tumilat, a natural corridor in and out of Egypt, but its exact position is not yet settled.
3. Ongoing excavations at Tell el-Dab'a (Raamses) have revealed a prosperous ancient city with many monuments, temples and buildings. Tell el-Retaba is thought to be the most probable location of Pithom, but sufficient excavation has not been done onsite.

D. The Siloam tunnel inscription.

1. Two boys discovered this ancient inscription carved in stone along the wall of a tunnel as they were wading through the southern end of the tunnel's waters in 1880.

2. The inscription comes from the days of King Hezekiah (701 B.C.) who ordered the tunnel to be made so the water from Jerusalem's Gihon Spring could be brought into the city to a man-made reservoir, the Pool of Siloam. This tunnel provided water to Jerusalem during the anticipated siege of King Sennacherib of Assyria.
3. The inscription celebrates the completion of this remarkable tunnel as mentioned in 2 Kings 20:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:30.

E. The Sennacherib Prism.

1. A 15-inch tall, six-sided baked clay prism from ancient Assyria contains the story of the invasion of the kingdom of Judah by Sennacherib in 701 B.C. The prism was found at Nineveh.
2. King Sennacherib of Assyria is mentioned in 2 Kings 18-19. Isaiah prophesied that God would protect Jerusalem against attack by Sennacherib (Isaiah 36-37; 2 Chronicles 32). The prism, together with the Lachish reliefs and excavations, adds detail to the biblical account. Sennacherib claimed to have trapped Hezekiah in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage."
3. The Bible says that God spared Jerusalem. King Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, and Isaiah brought him God's message. That night the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrians, and Sennacherib went back to Nineveh and later was killed by his sons (Isaiah 37:35-38).

F. The Dead Sea Scrolls.

1. The Dead Sea Scrolls are actually hundreds of scrolls and scraps that date between 300 B.C. and A.D. 70. The first of them was found in 1947 in jars in caves of the Qumran area near the Dead Sea.
2. About one-third of the scrolls contain copies of portions of Old Testament books (every book but Esther). These copies are over 1,000 years older than most of the manuscripts scholars previously had available for study and translation.
3. This is one of the most important finds in history because it shows that the Old Testament was copied very accurately over the centuries. When the scrolls were compared with the oldest Masoretic text, on which most modern translations are based, only insignificant differences were found.

G. Geisler said, "In every period of Old Testament history, we find that there is good evidence from archaeology that the scriptures speak the truth. In many instances, the scriptures even reflect firsthand knowledge of the times and customs it describes. 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."

III. New Testament Archaeology

A. The Pontius Pilate inscription.

1. In 1961 archaeologists working at the ruins of Caesarea Maritima found a stone slab bearing the name of Pontius Pilate, who was mentioned 54 times in the New Testament, mostly due to his involvement in the trial of Jesus.
2. This is the oldest appearance of Pilate's name to be found, and it actually dates to the time of Jesus (Luke 3:1).

B. The Galilee boat.

1. In 1986 the water of the Sea of Galilee reached an unusually low point. At that time, residents of a village on the northwest shore discovered an ancient fishing boat that has been claimed to date from the first century B.C.
2. The vessel was 25 feet long and was preserved in the mud of the lake. Coins and pottery found with the boat date to New Testament times. The only such boat ever found, it shows the type of boats used by Jesus and the disciples.

C. The Pool of Bethesda.

1. This site, mentioned in John 5:1-15, had long been disputed. Until the 19th century, there was no archaeological evidence for the Pool of Bethesda, so skeptics used this as proof that John's account was written by some later zealot who did not have eyewitness knowledge of Jerusalem or an actual pool called Bethesda.
2. In 1956, digging at the ancient biblical site of Bethesda, near the Sheep Gate just north of the temple mount in Jerusalem, archaeologists unearthed a rectangular pool 40 feet underground with two porticos or colonnades on each side and a fifth one on the broad retaining wall that separates the northern from the southern pool.

D. The Arch of Titus.

1. Carved in relief on the triumphal Arch of Titus, in the ancient Forum (public square) of Rome, is a commemorative scene of Roman soldiers on parade carrying items looted from the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. These items included the Table of the Showbread, the Menorah (Golden Lampstand) and a scroll of God's law.
2. When the gospel was spreading throughout the Mediterranean world, on the ninth of Av (a Jewish calendar month corresponding to June) in A.D. 70, the army, led by General Titus, destroyed both the city and the temple, carrying away the sacred temple items (cp. Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6).

E. The Gallio inscription.

1. Archaeologists found a stone inscription at Delphi, Greece, that mentions a Roman governor (proconsul) named Gallio of the province of Achaia.
2. The inscription contains a Roman date, corresponding to A.D. 52. Gallio is the same governor referred to in Acts 18:12. The date on this inscription allows Bible scholars to know almost exactly when Paul was working with early Christians in Corinth.

F. The Bema at Corinth.

1. One of the most important New Testament archaeological finds from Corinth is the city's "Bema," a platform where officials addressed the public.
2. In A.D. 51 the apostle Paul was brought before the Roman governor Gallio at this platform in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17; cp. 2 Corinthians 5:10). The Bema was discovered in 1935. The identity of the Bema is certain because seven pieces of an inscription are found nearby.

G. 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. The New Testament narrative just will not fit into a second century background."

Conclusion. 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. Studying archaeology is very faith-building. It assures us that the Bible is not legend and myth — it is history.