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Armchair Archaeology and the New Atheism

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Archaeology has an air of mystery about it. Whenever the subject is brought up, many people instinctively think of the iconic Indiana Jones and his adventures on the silver screen. Others think of buried treasure or exotic locations. In the early days of archaeology, European travelers could be seen out in the field in Victorian garb, sitting under lace umbrellas and sipping tea from fine china. The wealthy traveled with all the fineries of home, surveying the scene while native workers toiled under the hot Middle Eastern Sun. There was much less of the scientific rigor of modern archaeology. It was

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sometimes little more than glorified treasure hunting. Today there is much more to the discipline than romantic visions of danger, intrigue, and golden fortunes.

Archaeology is a scientific discipline requiring dozens of specializations. Despite its complexity, it has the unenviable distinction of being a field in which anyone with sufficient interest and a modicum of experience can claim to be a specialist. Popular examples include self-proclaimed experts who claim to have found chariot wheels at the bottom of the Red Sea, the real location of Mt. Sinai, and the long-lost treasures of Solomon in a hidden cave beneath the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. These claims are difficult, if not impossible, to verify, and are often accompanied by dubious proof and doctored evidence. Archaeology is a field subject to severe abuse by those with too little training and too much imagination.

The mistreatment of archaeological evidence is not the sole property of poorly trained apologists. It is also found in the writings of the new atheists. “New atheism” is much like atheism in general, except that it is exceptionally militant and intolerant of everything remotely religious in nature. The term appears to have been coined by Gary Wolf in a November 2006 article in *Wired Magazine* titled, “The Church of the New Believer.” In the article, Wolf says that the new atheist will “not let us [unbelievers] off the hook simply because we are not doctrinaire believers. They condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God” (2006). The new atheist is not merely an unbeliever, but one who **promotes** disbelief and has no tolerance for anyone who respects religion, whether theist, agnostic, or atheist. For new atheists, it is all or nothing. Incidentally, Wolf—though an atheist himself—ultimately disagrees with the severity of the new atheists’ approach.

The most noticeable of the current leaders in this new and virulent strain of militant atheism include Englishmen Richard Dawkins (biologist) and Christopher Hitchens (polemicist and political journalist), and American Sam Harris (neuroscientist). Their diatribes against religion are both malicious and well publicized. Virtually anything they write is going to secure a place near the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. This is not surprising, since their devotees are anxious for any new criticism of Christianity, and believers want to read them to understand the new arguments facing the faithful.

The new atheists frequently appeal to subject areas outside their specialties for proof to support their claims. Such might not otherwise discredit their views, but their level of proficiency in these areas is decidedly inferior, as borne out by the numerous mistakes, misunderstandings, and logical errors that pepper their works. One of the blatant areas of abuse concerns their appeals to archaeology.

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While Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris are gifted with formidable intellects and considerable literary prowess, archaeology lies outside their realm of competency. They would do well to remember that expertise in one area does not immediately transfer into any other area of one's choosing. Dawkins may be a highly respected biologist among evolutionists, but he is a rather poor student of the religion he so fiercely opposes. In some cases it appears almost as if he reaches for any argument, no matter how poor, to justify his extreme dislike for Christianity. Hitchens is an insightful journalist, but his impeccable prose inadequately conceals a lamentable ignorance of Christianity and the wealth of evidence supporting its claims. Harris is an up-and-coming scientist, but his skills in logic and argumentation are virtually nonexistent and have drawn heavy criticism from nearly all quarters. All three men may be gifted in their areas of specialization, but outside those areas they are like fish out of water. They seem to have gained only enough familiarity with Christianity to generate criticism that will tickle the ears of their adherents. Their attacks on the Christian faith are little more than public proofs of their inadequacy as critics.

The Responsible Use of Archaeology

Archaeology is an exciting field that brings a great deal of information to bear on the study of the Bible. At the same time, archaeologists must exercise caution in evaluating ancient evidence for several reasons. First, the ancient evidence is usually very fragmentary. Not all the evidence from antiquity made it into the ground in the first place, and if it did, the march of time frequently takes its toll on ancient artifacts. This is not surprising since artifacts deteriorate even in climate-controlled environments in state-of-the-art museums. Second, with every season new discoveries are brought to light, adding to the body of information we possess about the ancient world. The next year could well produce evidence that contradicts this year's conclusions. Finally, the surviving evidence is piecemeal in nature, requiring archaeologists to fill in the gaps with educated guesswork where conclusiveness may be lacking. This is not to say that archaeology cannot reach definite conclusions, but only to say that those conclusions may frequently be tentative in nature. Unlike responsible scholars, the Bible's critics frequently make grandiose appeals to evidence without the caution employed by those who understand how to evaluate the evidence.

Archaeology has been misused by those wishing to foster a skeptical attitude toward the factual reliability of the Bible. A prime example is an article published in *Harper's Magazine* titled, "False Testament: Archaeology Refutes the Bible's Claim to History." Author Daniel Lazare writes,

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Not long ago, archaeologists could agree that the Old Testament, for all its embellishments and contradictions, contained a kernel of truth.... That is no longer the case. In the last quarter century or so, archaeologists have seen one settled assumption after another concerning who the ancient Israelites were and where they came from proved false (2002, p. 39).

Lazare, a journalist with no archaeological credentials, does little more than survey the extreme left concerning the intersection of archaeology and the Bible. Yigal Levin, professor in the department of philosophy and religion at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, wrote a stinging response to the article in Harper's. He states: "From his essay, I learned only that Lazare is capable of summarizing *The Bible Unearthed*, written by my former teacher Israel Finkelstein and his colleague Neil Asher Silverman. Like their book, Lazare's essay is one-sided and overly dramatic" (Levin, 2002, p. 4).

The book to which Levin refers in his article is *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001). Finkelstein's work has drawn substantial criticism from other scholars—**even those who doubt the Bible's veracity**. Virtually no archaeologists have adopted his somewhat radical conclusions, which generally deny a great deal of historicity to the Old Testament narratives. It should be noted that Finkelstein, who once held a relatively positive position on the relationship between the Bible and ancient history, now holds a minority view that finds little acceptance among even mainstream archaeologists. His work has been heavily and publicly criticized by American archaeologist William Dever, who called the book "an archaeological manifesto, not judicious and well-balanced scholarship," adding, "it will do little to educate the public" (2001, 322:74). It is significant that Dever, one of the most widely respected archaeologists in America, states explicitly that he is "not a theist" (2005, p. xi).

A Classic Double Standard Used Against the Bible

The double standard employed against the Bible is both obvious and pervasive. One such example concerns the conquest of Canaan, which is frequently filed under the categories of fiction and myth. Joshua's campaign is usually assumed to be fictitious, but there is a parallel example from Egypt that mirrors Joshua's account. In 1275 B.C., the forces of Egypt under Ramesses the Great, and the Hittite Empire under general Muwatallis II, met at the Battle of Kadesh. Egyptian forces were separated into three units as they traveled northward through Canaan. Two divisions traveled farther inland, while a third made its route close to the Mediterranean coastline. The Hittites, lying in wait near the city of Kadesh, ambushed the Egyptian troops. The Hittite forces overran the first division and shattered it. The quick-thinking Ramesses hastily organized his troops and

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was able to fend off the Hittite offensive long enough for the third division to arrive. The reinforced troops eventually pushed back their Hittite opponents. In the end, Ramesses won a military victory, but suffered a political defeat since the Hittite Empire either retained or reclaimed lost territory in the area.

In typical Near Eastern fashion, Ramesses returned to Egypt and proclaimed a great victory. Indeed, the famous colossi at Abu Simbel were part of a monument erected near the border of Ethiopia to convince Egypt's neighbors that Ramesses had won a decisive victory—just in case they heard otherwise. A relief depicting the battle shows Ramesses gunning down fleeing Hittite soldiers with his bow and rolling over others like speed bumps in his oversized chariot. In the written account of the battle, he credits both divine intervention and his own leadership as the main causes for the Egyptian triumph over his enemies (Kitchen, 2000, 2:37). According to the poetic version of the account, Ramesses leaps into battle while the uraeus, the serpent-shaped symbol of protection worn on the forehead of the king, blasts fire at his enemies and consumes the Hittite forces like an ancient flame-thrower.

In inscription we see several parallels between the Battle of Kadesh and the military operations carried out under Joshua as recorded in the Old Testament: (1) both leaders are dynamic military figures, (2) each is said to rely upon divine aid to defeat his foes, and (3) each credits his deity with the victory. While no scholar denies the Battle of Kadesh took place, a majority dismisses the conquest of Canaan out of hand. For Ramesses, scholars simply excise any references to the divine and accept the rest as reliable narrative. For Joshua's account, the references to Yahweh immediately place the story in the realm of myth. No details are accepted as genuine. While there are other factors at work in this particular case (such as the debate over the available information that bears on the conquest of Canaan), it should be noted that for many people, including scholars, Scripture is virtually the only ancient literature where any mention of the supernatural immediately disqualifies any claim to historical reliability. Other ancient works are filled with magic and divine intervention, yet this fact does not stop scholars from searching them for a core historical truth. Quite the opposite is true in the case of the Bible.

Pseudo-Scholarship in the Popular Press

The popular press has been very active in its attempt to diminish the intellectual respectability of biblical faith, and the new atheists are one of the best examples. Their academic arrogance is nothing short of astounding, and only further highlighted by their lack of understanding of biblical studies. One of the most egregious examples of religious ignorance is found in David Mills' book *Atheist Universe*:

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It's fairly easy to demonstrably prove that the Genesis accounts of Adam and Eve, and Noah's worldwide deluge, are fables. It's easier to prove these stories false because, unlike the notion of God, the Creation account and Noah's flood are scientifically testable. Science may explore human origins and the geologic history of Earth. In this regard, science has incontrovertibly proven that the Book of Genesis is utter mythology (2006, p. 28).

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Mills provides a priceless example of just how badly militant atheists misunderstand ancient literature. Within a mere paragraph, Mills uses the terms "fable," "mythology," and (false) "story" interchangeably. None of these terms are synonyms. A fable is a whimsical tale, usually containing a moral or teaching point, in which talking animals frequently play primary roles. *Aesop's Fables* immediately comes to mind. This is quite different from the term "mythology," which centers on stories of the gods and often has a religious or cultic function. These stories also have varying degrees of contradiction with other myths within the same corpus in which the deities are represented. Incidentally, this is also different from a "legend," which is an embellished story about a human figure containing at least a kernel of historical truth.

Unlike myths, fables, and fictive stories, the Old and New Testaments are concerned with reporting factual details. The historical books frequently reference other sources such as the *Book of Jashar* (Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18), the *Book of the Wars of the Lord* (Numbers 21:14), and the *Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (2 Chronicles 27:7). It appears that the divinely-guided Hebrew writers worked with sources in similar fashion to modern historians. The writers often used source material and on occasion point the reader to those sources where additional information could be found at the original time of writing (e.g., 1 Kings 14:19). Luke makes it clear that he conducted an extensive investigation of the sources in the composition of his gospel account (Luke 1:1-4). His attention to geographical detail, long recognized by scholars for its accuracy and thoroughness, is quite out of keeping with ancient myths, which had no concern for this type of information. Finally, Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5-8), Peter (2 Peter 1:16), and John (1 John 1:1-2) all offer eyewitness testimonials, presupposing their readers had the ability to verify their claims.

It is important to note that the ancients rarely believed their myths actually happened in real time and space. Actual history is of very little concern in mythology, which may come as a surprise to many moderns. It seems to be just as surprising to the critics of the Bible, who invariably equate **myth** with **fiction**. The new atheists assume that Jesus is a mythological creation of the early church, missing the point that the early Christians actually believed that He walked the Earth, performed miracles, and rose from the dead. Unlike the pagan populace of Greece and Rome, early Christians were willing to die for

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their convictions. This attitude made them a target for the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata, who mocked their belief in eternal life. He wrote in “The Death of Peregrine”:

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.... You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them... (n.d., 4:82-83).

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Since martyrdom was virtually unknown in the Greco-Roman world, why did it become so common in the Christian community? Simply put, no one else believed in the exclusivity of religion. The ancients were polytheistic and inclusive. Not only were other gods recognized, but initiation in one of the mystery religions did not exclude membership in other cults. As long as one had enough money for the expensive initiation rites, he or she could be a member of any number of the secretive mystery cults in the Greek world.

In his book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens spends a few pages alluding to Jesus as merely one of many virgin-born, crucified messiahs (2007, pp. 22-23). Many critics have argued Jesus is nothing more than a plagiarized myth from other world religions, adapted for use by the earliest Christians. Allegedly, the virgin birth is found in Mithras worship, and other gods such as Attis and Osiris were crucified and resurrected. Critics do not appear to realize that in the mystery cult of Mithras, the god was born from a rock, and that the earliest stories come from over a century after the time of Christ (cf. Butt and Lyons, 2006). Further, Attis and Osiris were never crucified. Attis killed himself and Seth drowned his brother Osiris in the Nile River. Further, the two never truly resurrected. Attis remained in a comatose state where his hair still grew and his little finger twitched. Osiris is said to have been brought back to life but did not rejoin the land of the living. He instead remained in the underworld as the lord of the dead (the story also explains mummification, which is decidedly different from the Christian view of resurrection). One would be hard-pressed to find a true resurrection outside the Bible. All of this information is readily available in popular translations of the ancient myths that seem to have escaped the attention of Christianity’s most popular critics. In their haste to relegate the Bible to the realm of myth, the new atheists have failed to realize that the Bible records actual persons, places, and events that can be located in the archaeological record.

Embarrassment in the New Atheism

The new atheists are quite skilled at parroting critical scholars in the popular media, but give little evidence of having done any real research into the archaeological concerns

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surrounding the Bible. Their mistakes are so elementary that, if one did not know that they were ranked among the world's intellectual elite, one would simply consider them part of the lunatic fringe. The dogmatic conclusions reached by Dawkins and company are unjustified for several reasons. First, none is well-acquainted with the material he cites. Their specialties lie in unrelated fields, and their conclusions are frequently unsupported or even contradicted by the archaeological artifacts. Second, none possesses a basic, reasonable knowledge of Christianity. They often make basic mistakes that could have been easily prevented by spending time doing minimal research into basic biblical teachings. Finally, they make very few attempts at formulating arguments, and those they make are peppered with logical errors and fallacious reasoning.

Apologists for disbelief have noted the criticism of their leading spokesmen and have rushed to their defense. In a blog called the "Black Sun Journal," editor Sean Prophet writes:

The flimsiest of all the rhetorical devices used by religious writers is the accusation that atheists lack scholarship on religion. That they supposedly "don't even understand what they have rejected." This dismissive attitude is repeated *ad nauseam* in the popular media. While it's true that few atheists have doctor-of-divinity degrees, it's completely false that they therefore can't understand theology (Prophet, 2008, italics in orig.).

Prophet argues that it is false that atheists cannot understand theology. Yet, he misses the fact that critics such as Dawkins and P.Z. Meyers defend their refusal to engage Christian thought, sometimes crudely, as in the case of a Meyers's piece titled, "The Courtier's Reply" (2006). Georgetown professor John Haught critiques them, saying, "Given all their bluster about the evils of theology, why do they wade only ankle deep in the shallows of religious illiteracy? A well-thought-out military strategy sooner or later has to confront the enemy at its strongest point, but [Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens have—DB] avoided any such confrontation. Unlike the great leaders in war, these generals have decided to aim their assaults exclusively at the softest points in the wide world of faith" (2008, p. 63, bracketed item added). While he criticizes the supposed myth of ignorance surrounding the militant, atheist movement, Prophet appears to have as little understanding of religion as those whom he defends. Indeed, his assertion that "[r]ank-and-file atheists are far more facile with scripture than rank-and-file Christians" is so laughable and outrageous as to be absurd. A cursory survey of militant, atheist literature from those who are considered its greatest scholars quickly reveals a host of misunderstandings readily apparent to any unbiased observer.

One example of Dawkins' many academic sins concerns the Gnostic gospels. In *The God Delusion*, he argues that Thomas Jefferson advised his young nephew to read the other

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accounts of Jesus' life, which Dawkins claims are the Gnostic writings such as the "Gospels of Thomas, Peter, Nicodemus, Philip, Bartholomew, and Mary Magdalen" (2006, p. 95). It would be quite impossible for Jefferson to have recommended the Gnostic gospels to his nephew since **they were unknown in his day**. So it is with the apocryphal gospels. Those of Thomas and Philip were among the cache of documents discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. The gospels of Peter and Mary were both found in the late 1800's. The gospel of Bartholomew has yet to be positively identified. In every case, these non-canonical writings date much later than the time of Christ and provide no evidence of offering genuine accounts of Christ's life.

Christopher Hitchens follows in Dawkins footsteps when he misunderstands the nature of the Gnostic writings. He says that the gospels "were of the same period and provenance as many of the subsequently canonical and 'authorized' Gospels" (2007, p. 112). Yet, Gnostic beliefs arose shortly after Christianity, and the documents produced by Gnostics date from the second century to the fifth century and later. As a marriage between Christianity and Neo-Platonic philosophy, Gnosticism reached its height in the second and third centuries, but its incipient form is implicitly condemned in several New Testament passages (Colossians 2:9; 1 John 1:1; cf. 1 Peter 2:24).

Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris appear to draw their notions about the supposed legendary nature of the gospel accounts from Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. All three heartily recommend Ehrman's book and give him high praise for his journey into unbelief, which he never seems to tire of describing (2005, pp. 1-15; 2008, pp. 1-19; 2009, pp. ix-xii). The new atheists are apparently unaware that Ehrman's work has drawn heavy criticism because of its tendency to sensationalize, overplay the evidence, and present ideas that few of his academic peers affirm, regardless of their religious orientation or lack thereof. That the trio—as non-specialists who know relatively little about Christianity—would lean so heavily on a scholar like Ehrman is, perhaps, understandable, but remains inexcusable.

Hitchens claims that the existence of Jesus is "highly questionable" and there is a "huge amount of fabrication" in the details presented in the gospel records (2007, p. 114). The only genre into which the gospel accounts could possibly be forced would be legend, but even then, there was insufficient time for Jesus to reach legendary status. As the acclaimed classical scholar A.N. Sherwin-White pointed out, it takes time for legends to accumulate about a historical person (1963, pp. 188-191). The gospel records are clearly non-mythological and give no evidence of being legendary.

The biblical ignorance of the new atheists is on full display when David Mills begs for Christians to defend why they believe in mythical creatures such as unicorns (Job 39:9-

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10; Psalm 22:21), cockatrices (Isaiah 11:8), and satyrs (Isaiah 13:21). He embarrasses himself when he writes:

I also find it revealing that, in the newer, modern-language translations of the Bible, these ridiculous passages of Scripture have been dishonestly excised, rewritten or edited beyond their original translation in the King James. So not only are the Great Pretenders forsaking long-honored and long-held Christian beliefs, but the Bible itself, under their supervision, appears to be experiencing a quiet, behind-the-scenes, Hollywood makeover as well (2006, p. 150).

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The words rendered “unicorn” (*re'em*, “ox”), “cockatrice” (*tsepha`*, a type of serpent), and “satyr” (*sa`ir*, “goat”) have nothing to do with mythological creatures. In fact, these creatures did not even exist in ancient Near Eastern mythology. The last 400 years has seen an explosion in the knowledge of the biblical languages. Scholars now have the benefit of the numerous manuscripts and inscription discoveries that have greatly expanded our knowledge of the languages. The work at the ancient city of Ugarit alone has provided a wealth of information on the Hebrew language through the study of the closely related language of Ugaritic. Mills’ objection evaporates when we understand that the change in English translation is not due to a dishonest makeover, but to a better and truer understanding of how the original text should be translated. To his discredit, he mistakes dishonesty for intellectual progress, which only further underscores his unfamiliarity with the Bible and its ancient context—and his extreme prejudice.

Christopher Hitchens says the material from the Exodus to the Conquest of Canaan “was all, quite simply and very ineptly, made up at a much later date.... Much of the evidence is the other way” (2007, p. 102). Elsewhere, he says the Pentateuch is an “ill-carpentered fiction, bolted into place well after the nonevents that it fails to describe convincingly or even plausibly” (p. 104). Here Hitchens alludes to the Documentary Hypothesis which claims the books of Moses were compiled from different sources much later than the time of the Exodus. Again, Hitchens does not seem to know that recent discoveries have presented the Documentary Hypothesis with significant challenges that have yet to find plausible answers (cf. Garrett, 2000; Kaiser, 2001). While much of modern scholarship believes in the hypothesis, it must be noted that professors essentially pass on the theory to their students as a body of dogmatic teaching and rarely require them to actually question the theory (cf. evolution). Moreover, archaeology has consistently produced evidence that implies the writing of the Pentateuch is genuinely ancient.

Just when things could not get any worse, Hitchens further destroys his own credibility by claiming urban myth as fact. He states: “the Pentateuch contains two discrepant accounts of the Creation, two different genealogies of the seed of Adam, and two narratives of the Flood” (2007, p. 106). The two creation accounts are intentionally written

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for two different purposes and are complimentary, not contradictory. This is similar to the way in which a person might take a photograph of an object from two different angles in order more fully to explore the subject in view. Critics seem fixated on digging this old chestnut out of the wastebasket where it rightly belongs (cf. Jackson, 1991). Also, genealogies in the Bible are selective by nature, so differences in genealogical lists are inconsequential (cf. Miller, 2003). The alleged two narratives of the Flood in Genesis 6-9 refers to the artificial separation of the story into two constituent parts, which falls under the purview of the Documentary Hypothesis. This allegation, too, has been shown to be fraught with problems.

The Plausibility of the Biblical Record

Archaeology demonstrates solid connections between the biblical record and ancient history, in contrast to Christopher Hitchens' assertion that it is an implausible record. Consider the following:

The Patriarchs

Critics often malign the patriarchs without just cause. They insist that camels were not domesticated during the patriarchal age, thus constituting an anachronism in the biblical text. Yet evidence of camel domestication appears as early as 2000 B.C. in several places in Mesopotamia, concurrent with Abraham—if not slightly preceding him (Kitchen, 2003, p. 339). Another point of confidence is the names of the patriarchs. While God selected Jacob's name, they all highlight the Mesopotamian roots of Abraham since the names of Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, and Joseph are all of Amorite origin (pp. 341-342). These names were at the height of their popularity when the patriarchs lived in the early second millennium and quickly fell into disuse in subsequent centuries.

A vital piece of evidence is the structure of covenants in the Bible. Covenants made in antiquity evolved over time, and each period has a distinct structure for the covenants made at various times and particular locations. Kenneth Kitchen has surveyed a wide range of covenants used from the third millennium through the first millennium B.C. (Kitchen, 2003, pp. 283-289). He found the Abrahamic covenant made in Genesis 15-17 fits securely in the early second millennium, while the covenants in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua 24 fit only in a late second millennium context.

The Life of Joseph

In the very section of the Bible that Hitchens questions is found some of the most compelling evidence for the historicity of Scripture. As Egyptologist James K. Hoffmeier demonstrates, the story for Joseph rings true with numerous details (Hoffmeier, 1996, pp.

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77-98). The 20-shekel price paid for Joseph (Genesis 37:28) is consistent with the price of a slave c. 1700 B.C. Egyptian mummification took about 70 days once the period for mourning was included, which matches the time given for the mummification of Jacob (Genesis 50:3). Examples of non-Egyptians becoming viziers is known from Egyptian sources. Further, it appears that the story of Joseph was put down in writing during the 18th-19th Dynasties in Egypt, the very period during which Moses lived. This idea is borne out by the fact that the Pentateuch uses the name "Pharaoh" (Hebrew *phar'oh*, Egyptian *per-`3*) when referring to the king of Egypt. During this time, the term was a generic one referring to the king, similar to referring to the U.S. President as "the White House," or to the British monarch as "the Crown." Prior to this time, the name of the king was used, and afterward sources mention the monarch as "Pharaoh X" or "X, king of Egypt" — as in the case of pharaohs Shishak (1 Kings 11:40; 2 Chronicles 12:2) and Neco (2 Kings 23:29).

The United Monarchy

David's existence has been questioned frequently. Examples of petty monarchs ruling miniscule kingdoms in the Near East find rare mention in ancient sources, yet generally their historicity is taken at face value with minimal skepticism. Even Gilgamesh, the hero of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, is thought to have been a historical figure ruling in Mesopotamia between 2600-2700 B.C. based on a reference in the famous Sumerian king list. Yet, David's historicity is viewed with extreme suspicion, even though there are references to David found in the Tel Dan Inscription and the Moabite Stone, as well as numerous references in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, Gilgamesh is thought to have been a real person despite being the semi-divine hero in a mythical composition, which also includes such fantastic details as a beast-man named Enkidu, a divinely sent creature of destruction called the Bull of Heaven, and a plant that can grant the person who eats it eternal life. David is frequently labeled a myth despite the solid evidence in favor of his existence.

The Divided Monarchy

Archaeology has vindicated the Bible's mention of several figures that were once thought to have been fictional. The existence of Sargon (Isaiah 20:1) was questioned until a relief bearing his image was found in the throne room of his capital city of Dur-Sharrukin ("Fort Sargon"). Belshazzar (Daniel 5:1) was likewise questioned because Babylonian documents listed Nabonidus as the last king of the Babylonian empire. Scholars uncovered ancient evidence showing that Belshazzar co-ruled with his father Nabonidus, ruling from the city while Nabonidus sat for 10 years in self-imposed exile. Balaam (Numbers 22-24) has been located in an extrabiblical source called the Deir 'Alla Inscription written during this period (Mazar, 1990, p. 330).

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The Life of Christ

Archaeology does not always mention any one individual, and in the case of Christ, more substantial evidence comes from history rather than archaeology. One significant find is the 1990 discovery of the ossuary (bone box) of Joseph Caiaphas, high priest at the time of Jesus' trial and crucifixion (John 11:49-53). Jesus is mentioned by the Roman writers Suetonius and Tacitus, the Roman governor Pliny the Younger, and is indirectly referenced by the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata. He is also noted in a Jewish composition from the fifth century called the *Toledoth Jesu*, which gives an alternate explanation for the empty tomb from a hostile source. Jesus is far from the "myth" critics claim Him to be.

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The Early Church

Inscriptions have revealed the names of numerous individuals mentioned in the New Testament. Gallio, proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12-17), is mentioned in an inscription found at the city of Delphi. Paul's friend Erastus (Acts 19:22) is likely mentioned in an inscription found at Corinth. Sergius Paulus, mentioned as the first convert on the island of Cyprus, was proconsul (a Roman governor) when the apostle Paul visited the island (Acts 13:7). He is mentioned in an inscription found near Paphos (Reed, 2007, p. 13).

After the evidence is surveyed, it is apparent that much of the criticism of the Bible arises—not from intense scrutiny of the evidence—but from ignorance of it. The overwhelming weight of the archaeological and historical evidence firmly places the Bible in the sphere of reality rather than myth.

Knowing Should Lead to Knowing How Much One Does Not Know

Part of the problem with secular science is that it focuses on empirical data, but has little to no interest in epistemology: the study of how human beings know what we know. This great divorce has become clearer over the past couple of centuries, and is on full display in books like *The God Delusion*, where Richard Dawkins commits dozens of logical errors. Many of his arguments fail because he is not conversant with religion. They also suffer from his lack of understanding how evidence outside his specialty is to be interpreted and applied.

Journalist David Klinghoffer points out: "A favorite strategy of such groups has long been to attack cartoon versions of older rival religions" (2007). He cites as evidence Dawkins' now-infamous phrase about the God of the Hebrew Bible being "arguably the most unpleasant character in fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic,

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racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (Dawkins, 2006, p. 31). No believer in the Judeo-Christian tradition would ever agree to this assessment, nor would anyone familiar with the Bible defend it. While Prophet argues that contrarians like Dawkins should not be labeled as ignorant of religion (2008), the evidence argues powerfully against him.

The unmitigated vitriol that pervades the works of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris is a clear indicator that their intolerance of Christianity is not motivated by objective reason. These men give every appearance of being desperate to artificially maintain a hatred of God. They fail to demonstrate sufficient familiarity with the Bible and fail to understand the ancient evidence supporting it.

Christians everywhere should be reminded that grandiose assertions, unsupported by adequate evidence, can be dismissed safely. This is the case with much of the material produced by the new militant breed of atheism—which makes many bold claims and offers remarkably little proof. Such is certainly the case with the facts concerning the reliability and historicity of Scripture. Boisterous claims do nothing to bolster their case when Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris find themselves contradicted by the evidence. If these three are the best that militant atheism has to offer, Christians have nothing to fear.

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