

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Biblical Archaeology: Factual Evidence to Support the Historicity of the Bible

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Archaeological finds that contradict the contentions of biblical minimalists and other revisionists are well known. There are many more, however, that corroborate biblical evidence, and the following list provides only the most significant discoveries:

A Common Flood Story. Not just the Hebrews (Gen. 6–8), but Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Greeks all report a flood in primordial times. A Sumerian king list from c. 2100 BC divides itself into two categories: those kings who ruled before a great flood and those who ruled after it. One of the earliest examples of Sumero-Akkadian-Babylonian literature, the Gilgamesh Epic, describes a great flood sent as punishment by the gods, with humanity saved only when the pious Utnapishtim (AKA, “the Mesopotamian Noah”) builds a ship and saves the animal world thereon. A later Greek counterpart, the story of Deucalion and Phyrre, tells of a couple who survived a great flood sent by an angry Zeus. Taking refuge atop Mount Parnassus (AKA, “the Greek Ararat”), they supposedly repopulated the earth by heaving stones behind them that sprang into human beings.

The Code of Hammurabi. This seven-foot black diorite stele, discovered at Susa and presently located in the Louvre Museum, contains 282 engraved laws of Babylonian King Hammurabi (fl. 1750 BC). The common basis for this law code is the *lex talionis* (“the law of the tooth”), showing that there was a common Semitic law of retribution in the ancient Near East, which is clearly reflected in the Pentateuch. Exodus 21:23–25, for example, reads: “But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot...” (NIV).

The Nuzi Tablets. The some 20,000 cuneiform clay tablets discovered at the ruins of Nuzi, east of the Tigris River and datable to c. 1500 BC, reveal institutions, practices, and customs remarkably congruent to those found in Genesis. These tablets include treaties, marriage arrangements, rules regarding inheritance, adoption, and the like.

The Existence of Hittites. Genesis 23 reports that Abraham buried Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah, which he purchased from Ephron the Hittite. Second Samuel 11 tells of David’s adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. A century ago the Hittites were unknown outside of the Old Testament, and critics claimed that they were a figment

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of biblical imagination. In 1906, however, archaeologists digging east of Ankara, Turkey, discovered the ruins of Hattusas, the ancient Hittite capital at what is today called Boghazkoy, as well as its vast collection of Hittite historical records, which showed an empire flourishing in the mid-second millennium BC. This critical challenge, among many others, was immediately proved worthless — a pattern that would often be repeated in the decades to come.

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The Merneptah Stele. A seven-foot slab engraved with hieroglyphics, also called the Israel Stele, boasts of the Egyptian pharaoh's conquest of Libyans and peoples in Palestine, including the Israelites: "Israel — his seed is not." This is the earliest reference to Israel in nonbiblical sources and demonstrates that, as of c. 1230 BC, the Hebrews were already living in the Promised Land.

Biblical Cities Attested Archaeologically. In addition to Jericho, places such as Haran, Hazor, Dan, Megiddo, Shechem, Samaria, Shiloh, Gezer, Gibeah, Beth Shemesh, Beth Shean, Beersheba, Lachish, and many other urban sites have been excavated, quite apart from such larger and obvious locations as Jerusalem or Babylon. Such geographical markers are extremely significant in demonstrating that *fact*, not *fantasy*, is intended in the Old Testament historical narratives; otherwise, the specificity regarding these urban sites would have been replaced by "Once upon a time" narratives with only hazy geographical parameters, if any.

Israel's enemies in the Hebrew Bible likewise are not contrived but solidly historical. Among the most dangerous of these were the Philistines, the people after whom Palestine itself would be named. Their earliest depiction is on the Temple of Rameses III at Thebes, c. 1150 BC, as "peoples of the sea" who invaded the Delta area and later the coastal plain of Canaan. The Pentapolis (five cities) they established — namely Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron — have all been excavated, at least in part, and some remain cities to this day. Such precise urban evidence measures favorably when compared with the geographical sites *claimed* in the holy books of other religious systems, which often have no basis whatever in reality.¹

Shishak's Invasion of Judah. First Kings 14 and 2 Chronicles 12 tell of Pharaoh Shishak's conquest of Judah in the fifth year of the reign of King Rehoboam, the brainless son of Solomon, and how Solomon's temple in Jerusalem was robbed of its treasures on that occasion. This victory is also commemorated in hieroglyphic wall carvings on the Temple of Amon at Thebes.

¹ For example, in The Book of Mormon, proper names of places and people have no substantiation from outside sources.

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The Moabite Stone. Second Kings 3 reports that Mesha, the king of Moab, rebelled against the king of Israel following the death of Ahab. A three-foot stone slab, also called the Mesha Stele, confirms the revolt by claiming triumph over Ahab's family, c. 850 BC, and that Israel had "perished forever."

Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. In 2 Kings 9–10, Jehu is mentioned as King of Israel (841–814 BC). That the growing power of Assyria was already encroaching on the northern kings prior to their ultimate conquest in 722 BC is demonstrated by a six-and-a-half-foot black obelisk discovered in the ruins of the palace at Nimrud in 1846. On it, Jehu is shown kneeling before Shalmaneser III and offering tribute to the Assyrian king, the only relief we have to date of a Hebrew monarch.

Burial Plaque of King Uzziah. Down in Judah, King Uzziah ruled from 792 to 740 BC, a contemporary of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. Like Solomon, he began well and ended badly. In 2 Chronicles 26 his sin is recorded, which resulted in his being struck with leprosy later in life. When Uzziah died, he was interred in a "field of burial that belonged to the kings." His stone burial plaque has been discovered on the Mount of Olives, and it reads: "Here, the bones of Uzziah, King of Judah, were brought. Do not open."

Hezekiah's Siloam Tunnel Inscription. King Hezekiah of Judah ruled from 721 to 686 BC. Fearing a siege by the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, Hezekiah preserved Jerusalem's water supply by cutting a tunnel through 1,750 feet of solid rock from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam inside the city walls (2 Kings 20; 2 Chron. 32). At the Siloam end of the tunnel, an inscription, presently in the archaeological museum at Istanbul, Turkey, celebrates this remarkable accomplishment. The tunnel is probably the only biblical site that has not changed its appearance in 2,700 years.

The Sennacherib Prism. After having conquered the 10 northern tribes of Israel, the Assyrians moved southward to do the same to Judah (2 Kings 18–19). The prophet Isaiah, however, told Hezekiah that God would protect Judah and Jerusalem against Sennacherib (2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36–37). Assyrian records virtually confirm this. The cuneiform on a hexagonal, 15-inch baked clay prism found at the Assyrian capital of Nineveh describes Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BC in which it claims that the Assyrian king shut Hezekiah inside Jerusalem "like a caged bird." Like the biblical record, however, it does *not* state that he conquered Jerusalem, which the prism certainly would have done had this been the case. The Assyrians, in fact, bypassed Jerusalem on their way to Egypt, and the city would not fall until the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonians in 586 BC. Sennacherib himself returned to Nineveh where his own sons murdered him.

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The Cylinder of Cyrus the Great. Second Chronicles 36:23 and Ezra 1 report that Cyrus the Great of Persia, after conquering Babylon, permitted Jews in the Babylonian Captivity to return to their homeland. Isaiah had even prophesied this (Isa. 44:28). This tolerant policy of the founder of the Persian Empire is borne out by the discovery of a nine-inch clay cylinder found at Babylon from the time of its conquest, 539 BC, which reports Cyrus's victory and his subsequent policy of permitting Babylonian captives to return to their homes and even rebuild their temples.

So it goes. This list of correlations between Old Testament texts and the hard evidence of Near Eastern archaeology could easily be tripled in length. When it comes to the intertestamental and New Testament eras, as we might expect, the needle on the gauge of positive correlations simply goes off the scale.

To use terms such as “false testament” for the Hebrew Bible and to vaporize its earlier personalities into nonexistence accordingly has no justification whatever in terms of the mass of geographical, archaeological, and historical evidence that correlates so admirably with Scripture.

LET'S REVISE THE REVISIONISM

In view of the overwhelming evidence, to banner an article in Harper's as “False Testament” when referring to the Hebrew Bible is clearly an outrage. A cartoon in that article, showing the Bible being eaten away with vast corridors cut through its text, is an appropriately false caricature that goes with the rest of the article.²

This, however, is quite typical of the way biblical matters are reported in today's news media. An extraordinary archaeological discovery that confirms the biblical record barely receives any notice in the press, as witness the bones of the first biblical personality ever discovered in November 1990. Generally, only one in a hundred know that the remains of Joseph Caiaphas, the high priest who indicted Jesus before Pontius Pilate on Good Friday, were found at that time in an ossuary in the Peace Forest of Jerusalem south of the Temple area. Let sensation-seeking writers claim, however, that the patriarchs were mythical, that David was a petty hilltop chieftain if he existed at all, that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, or that God predicted the assassination of Israeli premier Itzhaak Rabin through some arcane Bible code (yet did nothing about it), and the press covers it sympathetically and in full. In no way is this fair, ethical, or even logical.

² Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

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Nor is the press alone in this deception. Radical revisionist biblical scholars and pseudo-scholars, like members of the notorious Jesus Seminar, are well aware of this sad sensationalizing formula for success and exploit it regularly. This may, admittedly, be impugning the motives of some in that category who are driven instead by a desire merely to be “politically correct” when it comes to biblical scholarship; that is, to be ultracritical of anything biblical. In this connection, sadly, secular historians of the ancient world often have a much higher opinion of the reliability of biblical sources than some biblical scholars themselves!

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Lest this critique be written off as the meaningless chatter of some conservative curmudgeon, however, I must point out that, in fact, it represents the majority view in biblical scholarship today. University of Arizona archaeologist William Dever, for example, is well known for his objection to the term “biblical archaeology,” since it seems to convey a pro-biblical bias; yet he assails some of the unwarranted conclusions of biblical minimalists in a strongly worded article in *BAR*: “Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey.”³ He does not have kind words for the minimalists in his book, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* either. “I suggest,” he writes, “that the revisionists are nihilist not only in the historical sense but also in the philosophical and moral sense.”⁴

BAR, which provides the literary arena for the traditionalist vs. minimalist battles and tries to keep a neutral stance in the process, similarly found the Harper’s article to be “only one side of a very hot debate in the field. Nowhere does [the author] try to evaluate the merits of the other side’s case. In fact, he gives no indication that he’s even aware there is another side.”⁵

Let the debate continue but let all the evidence be admitted. Ever since scientific archaeology started a century and a half ago, the consistent pattern has been this: the hard evidence from the ground has borne out the biblical record again and again — and again. The Bible has nothing to fear from the spade.

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³ William A. Dever, “Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey,” *BAR*, March/April 2000, 28.

⁴ William A. Dever, cited in Gordon Govier, “Biblical Archaeology’s Dusty Little Secret,” *Christianity Today*, October 2003, 38.

⁵ Steven Feldman, “Is the Bible a Bunch of Historical Hooey?” *BAR*, May/June 2002, 6.