

The Greatest Finds in Biblical Archaeology

INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY! That maxim is held dear by the citizens of the United States and is to be honored in all situations. However, there is one particular instance in which the reverse is true. Typically, when skeptics consider the Bible, the Bible is “guilty until proven true.”

This standard is far different from that applied to other ancient documents, even though many of those documents, if not most, have a religious element. They are considered to be accurate *unless* there is evidence to show that they are not. Although it is not possible to verify every incident in the Bible, the discoveries of archaeology since the mid 1800s have demonstrated the reliability and plausibility of the Bible narrative.

We will look at the discoveries over the years that have provided a wealth of outside corroborating evidence to the stories of the Bible.¹ Many of these finds are housed in the British Museum in London, England but we will not relegate our discussion to that single museum (though we will concentrate on it since Western Avenue is heavily involved in mission work in that city). The items are listed in no particular order of importance. However, the first three spots belong to the oldest Old Testament and New Testament texts known to us at this time.

Oldest Ancient Texts

Ketef Hinnom Amulets

DATE: 6th-7th Century BC

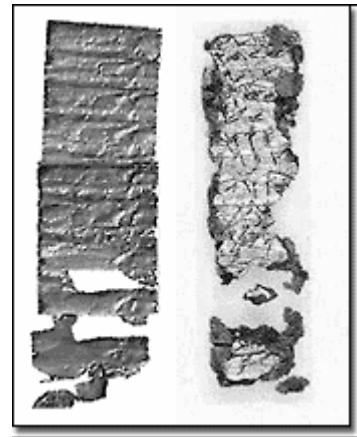
TIME OF: Ezekiel, Daniel, Obadiah, the Babylonian invasion of Judah, King Cyrus of Media, King Darius of Persia

BIBLE REFERENCE: Numbers 6:24-26; Deuteronomy 7:9

DISCOVERED: 1979 in rock-hewn burial caves at Ketef Hinnom ("shoulder of Hinnom") near Jerusalem

SIZE: 3.75" x 1" and 1.5" x 0.5"

CURRENTLY LOCATED: Israel Museum in Jerusalem



¹ Sources used include Walt Kaiser, “Top Fifteen Find from Biblical Archaeology,” *Contact* (magazine of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), Winter 2006; Jay Smith, “The Bible in the British Museum and in the British Library,” Self-published, 2006; Peter Masters, *Heritage of Evidence in the British*; T.C. Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum: Interpreting the Evidence*; Ada R. Habershon, *The Bible and the British Museum*; Norman Prescott, *Dual Heritage: The Bible and the British Museum.*; Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism*; Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible.*

The antiquity of the Old Testament is witnessed by two silver amulets discovered underneath a rocky foundation on which St. Andrews Church stands, across the Hinnom Valley from the western walls of the old city of Jerusalem. These two silver plaques were found in Cave 25 in 1979 by Gabriel Barkay. The larger amulet measures four inches by one inch and the smaller amulet measures 1 ½ inches by ½ inch.

These 6th-7th century BC silver plaques (several hundred years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls), rolled up to form two amulets, are inscribed with the words of the Aaronic or priestly blessing found in **Numbers 6:24-26**² on one and **Deuteronomy 7:9**³ on the other. Both match the Hebrew words found in the Pentateuch and have extraordinary correspondence to the wording and spelling of these Scriptures. This find challenges the idea of liberal scholars and skeptics who claim that the first five books of the Bible were not written by Moses but by individuals AFTER the exile.

Of further importance is that the prayer-like inscription contains the divine name of YHWH and provides the oldest extra-biblical evidence for the name of God thus far archaeologically recovered in Jerusalem.

The owner apparently wore the inscribed silver amulet as a bracelet during his/her lifetime, and people felt it appropriate that such objects should accompany the owner in death as in life.

John Rylands Papyrus

DATE: 6th-7th Century BC

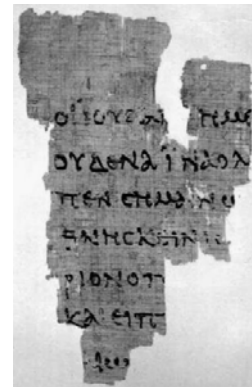
TIME OF: Justin Martyr, Emperors Trajan and Adrian

BIBLE REFERENCE: John 18:31-33 and 18:37-38

DISCOVERED: Egypt in 1920

SIZE: 3.5" x 3.5",

CURRENTLY LOCATED: John Rylands Library Manchester, England



This papyrus, written in Greek, contains seven lines on each side. The lines contain portions of John 18:31-33⁴ and 37-38.⁵ This document, found in Egypt in 1920, is the oldest known fragment of a copy of the original New Testament. A wide consensus dates this document to approximately AD 125. However, since this fragment was found as far south as Egypt, it was

² Number 6:24-26 - The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

³ Deuteronomy 7:9 - Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

⁴ John 18:31-33 - Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

⁵ John 18:37-38 - Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world— to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

written earlier. This successfully put an end to the one-time popular attempt to date John's Gospel well into the late second century.

Dead Sea Scrolls

DATE: 1st -2nd Century BC

TIME OF: Virgil, Cicero, Britain discovered by Rome, Maccabean Revolt

BIBLE REFERENCE: All of the Old Testament except Esther

DISCOVERED: Near the Dead Sea in 1947

SIZE: Multiple scrolls, fragments

CURRENTLY LOCATED The Shrine of the Book, part of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Fragments are found in museums and universities around the world.



The most sensational manuscript discovery of our times is the Dead Sea Scrolls. The initial discovery was by “chance” in 1947, and not by archaeologists! Bedouin shepherds found seven scrolls or parts of scrolls and fragments, along with store jars and broken pottery jars in a cave overlooking the northwest end of the Dead Sea. When a dealer acting on behalf of the shepherds sold the scrolls, they came to the attention of scholars in Jerusalem and then the scholarly world.

Subsequent investigations in the area of the cave of discovery ultimately led to the recovery of documents in a total of eleven caves and the excavation of a modest ruin nearby known as Khirbet (the ruin of) Qumran.

Among the more than 1,100 documents and 100,000 fragments are several intact and complete copies many of the books in the Hebrew Bible (our OT). In fact, all books of the OT are at least found in fragmentary form except for the Book of Esther.

These texts are older by at least a thousand years than any previous biblical texts written in Hebrew that we had prior to the discovery. They provide a window into the textual history of the OT prior to the closure of the canon. Before this find, the earliest copy of the Old Testament we had was copied in AD 920. With this find, we now had copies of the Old Testament from one thousands years before even that!

Now we know that the Bible had been preserved with dramatic accuracy for what was now almost 2000 years. One copy of Isaiah showed that after a gap between the original writing and the writing of this copy (almost 1000 years), only three words in about 100 pages of our English Bibles had any difference whatsoever (and those differences amounted to variations in spelling such as “honor” and “honour.”

The Dead Sea Scrolls now reside mainly in the Shrine of the Book, a part of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem where they are on display. The Copper Scroll can be seen in the Archaeological Museum in Amman, Jordan. Many of the small fragments are housed in the

Rockefeller Museum in East Jerusalem. Scholars work almost exclusively with photographs and microfilm of the fragments, however, and these are available to scholars at many of the major universities around the world. It is likely that researchers will still be at work on the scrolls fifty years from now.

Basalt Stele

DATE: 1000 BC

TIME OF: David, Solomon

BIBLE REFERENCE: 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel

DISCOVERED: Israel in 1993 (large fragment) and 1994 (smaller fragments)

SIZE: Larger fragment: 12.5” x 8.5”; smaller fragments: 7.8” x 5.5” and 3.9” x 3.5”

CURRENTLY LOCATED: Israel Museum on Jerusalem



Bible History Online

The Basalt Stele, found in the region of Dan in 1993, is a black basalt stele⁶ erected by an Aramaean king in northernmost Israel. The stone contains an Aramaic inscription to commemorate his victory over the ancient Hebrews.

In 1993, Avraham Biran of the Hebrew Union College found in an exposed wall of stones one basalt fragment about 12 inches high. Two smaller pieces were found in the same location about one year later that matched up with the original find.

Inscribed on this stone are the words “House of David.” This gave us the first external evidence to the Bible for the reality of King David’s actual existence. A liberal theory had been gaining ground that much of Israel’s history was back-written while in Babylonian captivity in an attempt to cast a favorable shadow on Israel. For the most part, David was seen as a mythological character from Israel’s past – *sort of like a Jewish King Arthur*.

This caused scholars to look more closely at the Moabite Stone (or Mesha’s Stele), found a century earlier. With this new find, the words of the Mesha Stone were seen to also speak of Mesha throwing off the yoke of oppression cast by the “house of David.”

With these two discoveries, we now have two external references that speak to the existence of David. With this discovery and translation, scholars returned to the Mesha Stele, found one hundred years earlier, which also was found to have the words “House of David.” (see later in the paper).

⁶ A stele is a stone or wooden slab, generally taller than it is wide, erected for funerary or commemorative purposes, most usually decorated with the names and titles of the deceased or living—inscribed, carved in relief, or painted onto the slab.

The Moabite Stone

DATE: 853 BC

CHIEF PEOPLE: Mesha (King of Moab), Omri and Ahab (Kings of Israel), Elisha,

BIBLE REFERENCE: 2 Kings 3:4-5

DISCOVERED: 1868, 20 miles east of the Dead Sea in Dibon

DIMENSIONS: 4 feet high, 2 feet wide, 2.5 inches thick

CURRENTLY LOCATED: The Louvre in Paris



The land of Moab lay east of the Dead Sea and was roughly 600 miles long by 25 miles wide. David and Solomon turned it into a vassal-state. It remained a vassal-state until 930 BC when the nation gained independence once again.

However, the Bible tells us that by 853 BC (just 77 years later), the nation had already been subdued again by Israel. Now, Moab was planning a second attempt at independence. The Bible tells us in 2 King 3:4-5 that:

- 4 Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheep breeder, and used to pay the king of Israel 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams.
- 5 But when Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.

There was no evidence of this situation until 1868 when an Arab sheikh found the stone and translated it. The stone named Omri and Ahab and listed the accomplishments of Mesha, king of Moab. In its thirty-nine lines of writing, we read:

“I am Mesha . . . king of Moab . . . As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab for many years . . . and his son [Ahab] . . . also said, I will humble Moab. In my time he thus spoke, but I have triumphed over him . . .”

This is a remarkable find that once again established credibility to the accounts given in Scripture.

Furthermore, this stone also records the name of King David, the second such object to reveal the previously undiscovered name of Israel’s greatest king. Now two such objects exist!

Winged Bull of Sargon

DATE: 717 BC

TIME OF: Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, Hoshea (King of Israel), Isaiah

BIBLE REFERENCE: : Isaiah 20:1

DISCOVERED: Site of Dur-Sharrukin – 1843.

SIZE: 15.5 feet by 15.5 feet; 25 tons

CURRENTLY LOCATED: Oriental Institute, University of Chicago



Several individuals are named in the Bible who have no corroborating evidence in history. One such person was King Sargon II of Assyria. Isaiah 20 says he was the King of Assyria but his name was never found in any of the excavations in the capital city of Nineveh. Now we know why.

Sargon decided to build a new palace in Dur-Sharrukin, about 12 miles northeast of Nineveh. Construction began in 717 BC but the walls of the new city were one mile on each side. However, Sargon died before it was finished and the site was abandoned.

In 1843, a French archaeologist discovered the site and a massive 25-ton bull/man god guarding the throne room of the palace. King Sargon did exist, just as the Bible says.

The Black Obelisk

DATE: 841 BC

TIME OF: Shalmaneser III, Joram (King of Israel), Jehu (King of Israel); Elisha

BIBLE REFERENCE: 2 Kings 8-10 (Specifically 2 Kings 10:34)

DISCOVERED: Palace in Nimrud, south of Nineveh along Tigris River

SIZE: 6 ½ feet tall,

CURRENTLY LOCATED: British Museum



From the Bible, we know that Jehu, a military captain, was anointed king of Israel by Elisha's messenger after years of evil leadership by Ahab, Ahaziah and Jehoram (or Joram). Jehu was commissioned by Elisha to destroy the evil Ahab dynasty, as recorded in 2 King 9-10. In that text, we read the familiar texts of Jehu's mad dash in the chariot to Jezreel and the death of Queen Jezebel, thrown from a window where the dogs below ate her flesh.

Jehu purged Israel of Baal worship and exterminated the failed royal house of Israel. Jehu would go on to rule Israel for 28 years. In the first year of that reign, he attempted to buy the friendship of Assyria with tribute money to Shalmaneser III. That biblical event is depicted on this obelisk.

This monument provides us the only known picture of a Hebrew king. It is a black limestone pillar about 6½ feet tall. All four sides of the obelisk (like the Washington Monument) is covered with pictures and writings recording Shalmaneser's military campaigns of thirty-one years and the tribute exacted from his neighbors (including camels, monkeys, an elephant and a rhinoceros).

There are five scenes of tribute, each of which occupies four panels round the face of the obelisk and



is identified by a line of cuneiform script above the panel. From top to bottom they are:

- Sua of Gilzanu (in north-west Iran)
- Jehu of Bit Omri (ancient northern Israel)
- An unnamed ruler of Musri (probably Egypt)
- Marduk-apil-usur of Suhi (middle Euphrates, Syria and Iraq)
- Qalparunda of Patin (Antakya region of Turkey)

The second depiction from the top is of Jehu, the king of Israel paying homage to the Assyrian king. Jehu is actually named and is shown bowing before the king. The text says, “. . . the tribute of Jehu (Ia-w-a), sone of Omri (Hu-um-ri); I received from him silver, gold, a golden bowl, golden goblets, pitchers of gold, tin, a staff for the hand of the king . . .”

This monument is of enormous historical value for it is the only secular piece of evidence where a person of Scripture is depicted.

Let's stay in this general era for just a little longer . . .

Stela of Shalmaneser II (Kurkh Stele)

DATE: 853 BC

TIME OF: Shalmaneser, Ahab of Israel, Benhadad of Syria

BIBLE REFERENCE: 1 Kings 22

DISCOVERED:

SIZE: 9.5 feet tall, 8800 pounds

CURRENTLY LOCATED: British Museum

Near the entrance of the British Museum stand three monuments which feature prominently in the Old Testament and confirm the integrity of the dates the Bible proclaims.

On the right is the sandy colored monument of extreme importance to Christians: the Stela of Shalmaneser III. He ruled Assyria from 859-824 BC. The stele records years one through six of the reign of the king, although the fifth year is missing.

In the stela, he is saluting his gods, which are symbolized in the figures above his hand. There are carved writings all over the front and back of this monument which describes his first six military campaigns. Of interest to the Christian is the specific mention of King Ahab of Israel and King Benhadad I of Syria.

We know that Ahab and Benhadad were almost constantly at war with one another. Yet, suddenly, in I Kings 22:1, we read of a period of three years of peace – “Three years passed without war between Aram and Israel”). Why did these two stop fighting? The stela tells us.

Shalmaneser records how he ventured west through many kingdoms but was met with resistance by the King of Hamath. The king of Hamath requested assistance from



neighboring kings and he found it in twelve (Ahab and Benhadad among them). They met in battle at Karkara (or, Qarqara).

Shalmaneser's remembrance of the battle is inscribed on the stone:

I approached Karkara. I destroyed, tore down, and bound Karkara, his royal residence. He brought along to help him 1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalrymen, 20,000 foot soldiers belong to Hadadezer [Benhadad] of Damascus . . . 2,000 chariots, 10,000 foot soldiers belonging to Ahab the Israelite. . .”

Shalmaneser goes on to boast that his victory was so great that “the rivers were dammed with corpses and the valleys flowed with blood.” His victory could not have been that dramatic because his advances were halted and he never took possession of the land. Neither does the Bible mention a defeat of Ahab or Ben-Hadad.

Soon after this allegiance was no longer needed, Ahab and Ben-Hadad assumed their personal wars (1 Kings 22:34-35).

Tiglath-Pileser Invades Israel

DATE: 732 BC

TIME OF: Isaiah, Hosea

BIBLE REFERENCE: 2 Kings 15:29;

1 Chron 5:25-26

DISCOVERED: ?

SIZE: 6'2" x 6'4"; six inches thick

CURRENTLY LOCATED: British Museum



After the death of Shalmaneser III in 824 BC, eighty years passed without serious trouble between Assyria and Israel. Then, in 745 BC, an Assyrian general came to power, took the name Tiglath-Pileser III, and revived the invasion policies of Shalmaneser.

Tiglath invaded Israel twice during his reign and a limestone monument tells of his capture of Astartu, a village near Gilead just east of the Jordan river. This was his second invasion of Israel and it took place between 734 and 732 BC.

In commemorating this second invasion, the king is shown on the bottom, while Israelite prisoners and plunder are depicted being led away below the king.

This scene totally corroborates the biblical account found in 2 Kings 15:29, which says:

“In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon and Abel-beth-maacah and Janoah and Kedesh and Hazor and Gilead and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried them captive to Assyria.”

I Chronicles 5:25-26 also refers to this invasion but refers to a king by the name of “Pul.” We read:

So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul, king of Assyria, even the spirit of Tilgath-pileser king of Assyria, and he carried them away into exile, namely the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and brought them to Halah, Habor, Hara and to the river of Gozan, to this day.

Many saw this as a contradiction. However, in another room in the British Museum, a tablet is housed that reveals that Tiglath-Pileser was also referred to as Pul. Again, the Bible writers are validated in their mastery of historical detail.

Other artifacts refer to this king and his battles against Israel. A clay tablet called “The Annals of Tiglath-Pileser III” can be found in Room 89 of the British Museum. On this clay tablet, the king invades Judah, Ammon, Moab, Ashkelon, Edom, Gaza, and Tyre. The biblical account of 2 Kings 15:29 tells us the same thing.

The Lachish Room & The Taylor Prism

DATE: 701 BC

CHIEF PEOPLE: Sennacherib, Hezekiah (King of Judah), Isaiah

BIBLE REFERENCE: 2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chronicles 32, Isaiah 36-37

DISCOVERED: 1830, Nineveh

SIZE: 15 “ tall, 6.5” at its widest, each face approx 3.5”

CURRENTLY LOCATED: British Museum

The British Museum’s “Lachish Room” houses the very first **direct** proofs found of an event in Bible history when it was discovered in 1847.

Sennacherib was the son of Sargon and grandson of Shalmaneser. In 701 BC, Hezekiah was king and Isaiah was Israel’s prophet. The Bible spends a lot of time detailing the interaction between these three men. It is also one of the best documented events in Assyrian historical records. Sennacherib lined the walls of his 71-room palace with stone reliefs that detail the exploits of his many battles.



One of the reliefs tells in written form that Hezekiah refused to pay tribute any longer to Sennacherib (see 2 Kings 18:1-8). Of course, this greatly angered the Assyrian king (see 2 Kings 18:13-15). Sennacherib approached Israel and Hezekiah relented under the threat,

giving Assyria 22,500 pounds of silver and 2,250 pounds of gold (much of it from the Temple).

Sennacherib decided to continue his advance on Jerusalem anyway. He sent word of his intentions to Hezekiah and also set up a siege of Lachish, the last fortified city on the main road to Jerusalem and only 30 miles from Jerusalem (see 2 King 18:17-37).

At Lachish, archeologists found the Taylor Prism. This eight-sided artifact parallels the account above and the biblical account found in 2 Kings 18-19 in seven areas. The large text on the Taylor Prism contains the following words of Sennacherib:

Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke, [I attacked] 46 of his strong, walled cities . . . by siege engines. . . He himself like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city. Earthworks I threw up against him; the one coming out of his city gate I turned back to his misery . . .



Both the Bible and the Taylor Prism agree that:

- 1) Hezekiah rebelled against Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:1-8)
- 2) The fortified cities of Judah fell (2 Kings 18:13)
- 3) Lachish also fell
- 4) Hezekiah was shut up in Jerusalem
- 5) Hezekiah paid 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold in tribute to Sennacherib to gain favor (2 Kings 18:14-15)⁷
- 6) Jerusalem did not fall but Lachish did
- 7) The Assyrian army left without firing a single arrow at Jerusalem

Why did the Assyrians leave Jerusalem after successfully taking Lachish? The prism gives no reason but the Bible gives us the answer. The Bible says that Sennacherib destroyed all the cities but Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:9 and Isaiah 37:9). He left because someone was attacking his southern flanks (King Tirhakah of Egypt/Ethiopia, see 2 Kings 19:9). Most historians believed Tirhakah never existed because no record was ever found of him. The Bible story was seen as a myth.



However, in the early 1900s, a statue was discovered and now resides in the British Museum. The Egyptian hieroglyphics written on this statue refer to King Tirhakah by name (spelled Taharqa by the British Museum).

We now know that this king was ruler of Cush, which includes present day Sudan, North Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia. He was a great power so when he attacked Sennacherib, it was a very serious matter. That is why Sennacherib left Jerusalem so unexpectedly.⁸

⁷ This equates to 22,500 pounds of silver and 2,250 pounds of gold.

When Sennacherib returned to Jerusalem to take up the battle once again, he brought a tremendous army of warriors. Yet, he again left without firing a single arrow upon Jerusalem. This time, when he left Jerusalem, he returned home and was killed by his two sons while worshipping in his pagan temple (as prophesied by Isaiah in 2 Kings 19:7). What happened that would cause a king of this stature to make such an unwise decision? The Bible fills in the gaps once again.

In the middle of the night, the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 of Sennacherib's men. Therefore he had no choice but to flee back to the safety of Nineveh. These facts are not found on the murals of Sennacherib's palace, as you can easily imagine. As seen earlier, kings do not record defeats. Both the Bible and the Assyrian records tell us that Sennacherib never took Jerusalem. The Bible tells us why. Historians who refuse to accept the Bible are still looking for a reason.

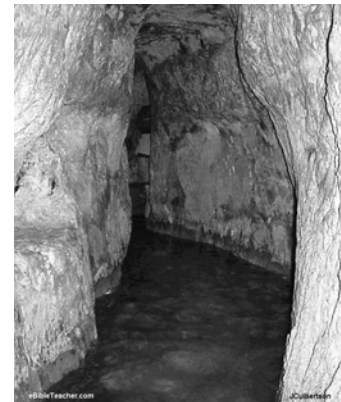


Interestingly enough, most of the murals from Nineveh's palace are charred. This is explained by the prophet Nahum who foretold that the great city would be destroyed by fire (see Nahum 1:10; 2:13; 3:13-15).

Hezekiah's Tunnel/Pool of Siloam

Before we leave Hezekiah and Sennacherib, there is one more feature of the biblical narrative that has been emphatically confirmed by archaeology.

In 2 Kings 20:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:3-4, the Bible tells us that in 701 BC, Hezekiah prepared for a siege by blocking up the water sources outside the city gate and diverting the Gihon Spring via a tunnel that ran into the city. This tunnel was finally discovered in 1838 by Edward Robinson, an American. It was cleared in 1909-1911. The inscription left by the workers at the completion of the tunnel was found in 1880.



The tunnel ranges in height from 5 ½ feet to as high as 16 feet. It runs 1,748 feet long. The tunnel is almost level, dropping only 12.5 inches in the course of its total length. At its deepest, it is 150 feet below the earth.

It was hand-carved out of solid limestone rock. Two teams of men worked towards each other from opposite ends of the tunnel and met in the exact spot. The commemorative plaque

⁸ Just a few years ago, another statue was found in a Southampton museum in England. This statue of a king was used as a bicycle stand until one of the curators of the British Museum saw it and recognized the figure and the writing. The king used as a bicycle stand was Tirhakah.

was installed by the workers at the site where they met. It currently is housed in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. It reads:



“This is the way the tunnel was cut through . . . while there remained six cubits to cut through, the voice of one workman [was heard] calling to his fellow . . . [words here seem to indicate they

had passed each other slightly] . . . and when the tunnel was driven through, the workmen struck each toward his fellow, axe against axe, and the water flowed from the spring to the reservoir for 1,200 cubits and the height of the rock above the head of the workmen was 100 cubits.”

We still have no idea how this engineering marvel was accomplished. We do not know how they figured to meet in the middle or how they ventilated that long, deep tunnel.

Important Ancient Tablets

The Amarna Letters

DATE: From 1390 BC

NUMBER: 382 tablets found

CHIEF PEOPLE: Egyptian Pharaohs and Joshua

BIBLE REFERENCE: Joshua 12:9-24

In 1887, a lot of 382 ancient letters were discovered in Egypt at the site of Tel el-Amarna. These clay tablets were written to two pharaohs (Amenophis III and IV) around 1390 BC. The senders of these letters were officials from Canaanite cities in Palestine around the time of Joshua.



Many of the letters refer to impending invasions by “the ‘Apiru” and another group that most think refer to the same people. Most likely, the ‘Apiru were not strictly Israelites but the Canaanites used that name to refer to any hostile and unsettled people group. By the time Joshua led the invasion of Canaan, this was the term used by the Canaanites. Therefore, conservative scholars equate the ‘Apiru with the Jews.

In one of these letters, we read:

“The ‘Apiru plunder the lands of the king. If archers are here this year, then the lands of the king, my lord, will remain. But if the archers are not here, then

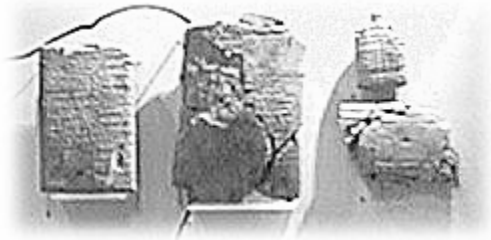
the lands of the king, my lord, are lost . . . All the lands of the king, my lord, are going to ruin.”

The pharaoh had little interest in his far-off land and sent no help. Joshua refers to thirty-one independent city-states that had their own kings (Josh 12:9-24). The Amarna letters confirm this picture of Joshua for they reflect the survival of only FOUR of these city-states with their own kings.

If the ‘Apiru are NOT the Israelites, then this amazing marauding army disappeared completely in very short order – which is barely credible.

The Nuzi Tablets

The Nuzi tablets were written around 2000 BC near Iraq and speak about a number of customs which we also see in the Bible:



- 1) a barren wife giving a handmaiden to her husband (Hagar)
- 2) a bride chosen for the son by the father (Rebekah)
- 3) a dowry paid to the father-in-law (Jacob)
- 4) work done to pay a dowry (Jacob)
- 5) unchanging oral will of a father (Isaac)
- 6) father giving his daughter a slave-girl (Leah, Rachel)
- 7) sentence of death for stealing cult gods (Jacob)

Many non-conservative scholars think that Genesis was written around the 6th century BC. Yet these customs in Genesis are similar to the ones described on the Nuzi tablets, which everyone agrees originated in the 19th century BC. How could the alleged 6th century BC Genesis “editors” have known of these trivial customs that existed 1300 years earlier? The author of Genesis had to have had intimate knowledge of that ancient culture.

The Ebla Tablets



In 1975, archeologists came across 17,000 tablets in a room that had fallen in on itself. These tablets dated to about 2300 BC. When translated from their cuneiform, one tablet listed five cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar.

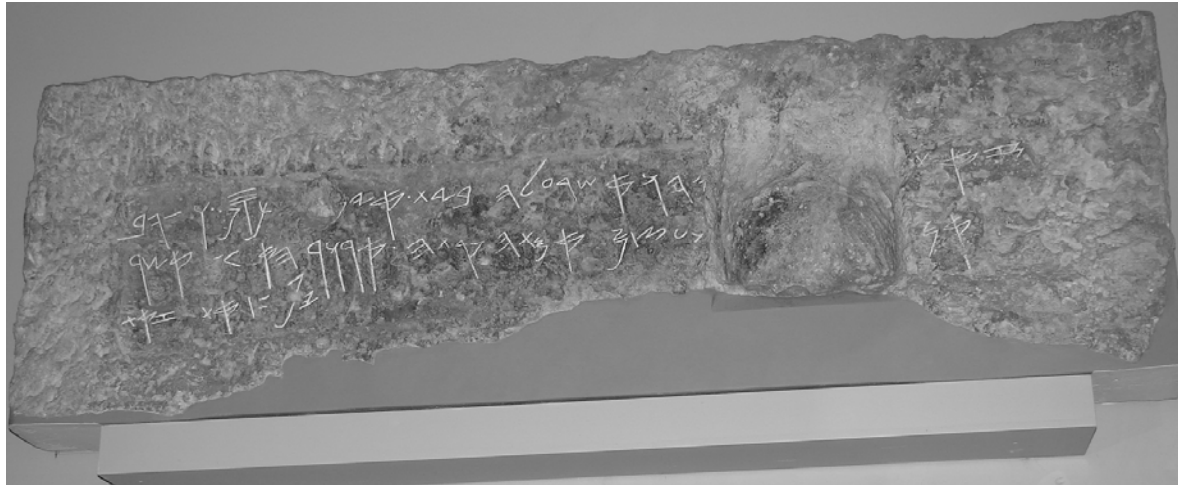
The same cities are listed in the same order in Genesis 14:8.

Shebna's Noble Tomb

DATE: 715 BC

CHIEF PEOPLE: Shebna, Hezekiah, Isaiah

BIBLE REFERENCE: Isaiah 22:15-20; 36:3; 37:2



A stone slab was found over 100 years ago but only translated in the 1950s. It was taken from above the door of a burial chamber carved into solid rock on a hillside. The inscription reads:

“This is _____yahu, who is Over the House. There is no silver and gold here; only [him] and the bones of his slave-wife. Cursed is the man who opens this.”

The partly obscured name is “Shebanyahu” or “Shebna.” The term “over the house” is a term of the controller of the royal revenues. In Isaiah 22:15-17, we read:

- 15 Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts, "Come, go to this steward, To Shebna, who is in charge of the royal household,
- 16 'What right do you have here, And whom do you have here, That you have hewn a tomb for yourself here, You who hew a tomb on the height, You who carve a resting place for yourself in the rock?
- 17 'Behold, the LORD is about to hurl you headlong, O man. And He is about to grasp you firmly
- 18 And roll you tightly like a ball, To be cast into a vast country;

Shebna was denounced by Isaiah for preparing a splendid throne for himself, a mark of arrogance and self-enrichment. Shebna was deposed from office and replaced by Eliakim (vv. 19-20). By the time Sennacherib was set to invade Judah, Eliakim was in office and heading up the negotiation team (Isaiah 36:3 and 37:2).

Shebna never occupied his tomb as he was “tossed like a ball into a large country” to die (Is 22:17-18)

Cylinder of Nabonidus

DATE: 539 BC

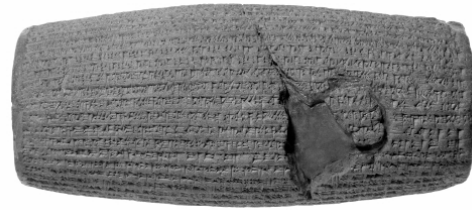
CHIEF PEOPLE: Belshazzar, Nabonidus, Cyrus, Daniel

DISCOVERED: 1854

BIBLE REFERENCE: Daniel 5:5, 5:30

HEIGHT: 9 inches tall, 3.6 inches around

CURRENTLY LOCATED: British Museum



In Daniel 5, we read that the king of Babylon, Belshazzar, held a great feast until a great finger wrote a message on the wall. Before the mid-1800s, scholars thought this was fictional. The last king of Babylon was known to be Nabonidus and no mention of Belshazzar was found in any records. The great Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote of the history of Babylon in 450 BC, never mentions Belshazzar.

However, in 1854, a cylinder was found in a ziggurat in Ur that tells us that Nabonidus entrusted the kingdom to his eldest son while the king was living in Tema in Arabia. The record ends with a prayer, where Nabonidus prays for “Belsarusur, the firstborn son, the offspring of my heart.” Now we know that Belshazzar did indeed exist.

Also, another artifact called the Nabonidus Chronicle further corroborates the historicity of Daniel’s book. This tablet covers events from 556 BC to 539 BC and at one point it says “The king was in Tema; the king’s son, courtiers and army were in Babylonia.”

Now we know that Daniel is accurate and also why Belshazzar offered Daniel a place as “third in command.” This also puts the writing of Daniel in the 6th century BC, not the second century BC as many scholars thought (hoped).

The implication of this is staggering: Daniel really does record prophecies!

Cylinder of Cyrus

DATE: 536 BC

TIME OF: Daniel

DISCOVERED: 1879

BIBLE REFERENCE: Ezra 1:1-3

SIZE: 9 inches long, 4.3 inches at widest point

CURRENTLY LOCATED: British Museum



This cylinder speaks of the wickedness of Nabonidus and how Cyrus, the king of the Medes and Persians, took control of Babylon without bloodshed in 539 BC. This confirms specifically the same story in Daniel.

The cylinder plainly declares that the account in Ezra is accurate. On the cylinder, Cyrus praises his God (Marduk) for selecting him to rule the world. Isaiah saw it differently. In Ezra 1:1-3, we read the amazing account of this king:

- 1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,
- 2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
- 3 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Scholars always mocked this account in Ezra, thinking no 6th century monarch would be so easy on a captured people as to declare religious liberty. The discovery of this cylinder squashed all such ridicule. It reads:

“As to the inhabitants of Babylon . . . I abolished the unpaid labor and denial of social standing . . . I brought relief to their derelict dwellings . . . I returned to the sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris (the sanctuaries of which had long been in ruins) the images which once lived in them and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered their former inhabitants and returned them . . .”

At one time, only the Bible told this story. Now, after even more discoveries, we know that Cyrus did this for other nations as well. The records of contemporaries place the essential facts beyond challenge.

Caiaphas Ossuary

DATE: AD 18-36

TIME OF: Jesus, Caiaphas the High Priest

BIBLE REFERENCE: John 11:49-53; John 18:14; Matt 26:69-75

SIZE: 14.5” tall, 29.5” long

CURRENTLY LOCATED: Israel Museum, Jerusalem



Caiaphas was the High Priest of Israel and leader of the Sanhedrin from AD 18 to AD 36. He was the one who gave the advice that it was better to kill one man (Jesus) that for the whole nation to suffer. He also presided over the trial of Jesus.

In what many believe to be his courtyard (the place where Peter later denied Christ while waiting for information about Jesus’ arrest), a “bone-box” was found in 1990 by accident while workers were building a water park. Inside the box are the bones of six people, including one 60-year old man.

Inscribed on the ornately decorated box (ossuary) is the following inscription: QAF̄A and YEHOSEF BAR QAYAF̄A. The historian Josephus gives the full name as “Joseph, who is called Caiaphas of the high priesthood.”

Pilate Inscription

DATE: AD 26-36

TIME OF: Jesus

DISCOVERED: June 1961

BIBLE REFERENCE: John 18, Luke 3:1

SIZE: 32” high, 25” wide

CURRENTLY LOCATED: Israel Museum, Jerusalem



A first-century monument was later re-used in a fourth-century remodeling project. It would seem the object was written to commemorate Pilate’s dedication of a temple to worship Tiberius Caesar during Pilate’s rule in Judea (AD 26-36). It was during this time that Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”

The Latin inscription of four lines reads, “Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea.” This title is reminiscent of the one given by Luke in Luke 3:1, which reads “Pontius Pilate, Governor of Judea.”

Once again, there is external evidence from archaeology showing that the Gospel record is accurate.

CONCLUSION

All of these items are of immense importance to the believer, no matter how much museum curators try to avoid and skeptics attempt to dismiss. The Bible truly is a remarkable book, accurate in its details and truthful in all it reveals.

Edited to add: I apologize for failing to include other items such as the Gilgamesh Tablet and the Politarch Inscription. These omissions are among many others, I am sure. You can only cover so much in one hour!