

ARCHAEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL CRITICISM

By Mark Paynter THD

McDowell defines archaeology in the following quotation

“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” ... In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Bible took a beating from higher criticism. Critics have sought to destroy the foundations of the historicity of the Bible by showing that the Bible has errors and must be adjusted to fit the “facts” of history. But now the tables are turning.”¹

“Archaeological research comprises three aspects: discovery and surface survey of the site; the technique of excavation; and the technique of interpretation”²

Steve Kumar in discussing the significance of archaeologies confirmation of the Bible’s accuracy states.

“ The significance of archaeology to the Bible is twofold: Firstly, it provides objective evidence for the accuracy of Biblical accounts. Secondly, it offers greater insight and factual information to biblical narrative. The Bible makes innumerable references to historical events and characters. These references include dates, customs, people, behavior, places and cities. Archaeological research done in Bible lands confirmed the reliability and historicity of Scriptures in so many areas. Every part of the Bible that could be checked by archaeology now provides proofs for the accuracy of the Bible... Today, archaeology has refuted the skepticism of the critics and confirmed the reliability of biblical history... If all the lines of evidence demonstrate

¹ McDowell page 91

² Negev, A. 1996, c1990. *The Archaeological encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (3rd ed.). Prentice Hall Press: New York

the reliability of the Bible, then the Bible's claims to being God's inspired Word should be taken seriously."³

P J Tan notes these two comments from former archaeologists.

"Dr. Robert Dick Wilson, former professor of Semitic philology at Princeton Theological Seminary, said, "After forty-five years of scholarly research in biblical textual studies and in language study, I have come now to the conviction that no man knows enough to assail the truthfulness of the Old Testament. Where there is sufficient documentary evidence to make an investigation, the statements of the Bible, in the original text, have stood the test."

And the noted Dr. J. O. Kinnaman said: "Of the hundreds of thousands of artifacts found by the archaeologists, not one has ever been discovered that contradicts or denies one word, phrase, clause, or sentence of the Bible, but always confirms and verifies the facts of the Biblical record."⁴

McDowell points out that archaeology makes several contributions to Bible knowledge these include:

- 1 Helps develop improved analysis of the manuscripts, improved understanding of technical terms and improved lexicons.
- 2 Confirms that the Bible is historically reliable and authentic.
- 3 Helps illustrate and explain the Biblical text and helps us better understand the culture and setting of the Biblical narrative.⁵

McDowell concludes, "It should be clear at this point that archaeology has done much not only to undermine the documentary hypothesis, but in fact support the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch."⁶

³ Kumar page 107-112

⁴Tan, P. L. 1996, c1979. *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations : [a treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers]*. Bible Communications: Garland TX 23 February 2002

⁵ See McDowell pages 369-383 for extensive discussion

⁶ McDowell page 387, for archaeology contribution to establishing mosaic authorship see McDowell pages 383-388

Achtemeier lists amongst the contributions that archaeology can make to Biblical Studies the following

- 1 Supply the material evidence to better understand the biblical message.
- 2 Provide information that helps us place the Bible's message in context.
- 3 Overcome the bias that lies dormant in the twenty-first theological mindset and help the Bible reader think like a person living at the time when the message was originally written.
- 4 Helps to topographically locate the incidents that occur in the Bible and their interconnectivity with one another.
- 5 By providing illumination "of the ambient cultures of the ancient Near East archaeology contributes to a better understanding of the social, economic, and religious environment of which ancient Israel was a part."⁷

"How does one reconstruct the history of ancient Israel? There are several approaches: the Albright school would utilize archaeology; the German school would follow a tradition-history approach; and sociologists would try to understand early Israelite life in socioeconomical categories...

Despite the limitations inherent in archaeology, history, and the Bible by reason of ambiguity or tendentiousness, these three disciplines together can furnish valuable insights into the life, culture, and religion of ancient Israel. Archaeology, history, and the Bible are vibrant disciplines today. Archaeology is generating so much material that it is almost impossible for any one person to encompass it. Archaeological activity is the source of new insights into biblical life and times; it is also the guarantee that the Bible will never be a dead letter, but always a living word."⁸

Richard M Riss provides some examples of how archaeology has confirmed the historical reliability of the Old Testament.

"Some of the most startling archaeological finds bear upon the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, a portion of the Bible that even some Bible-believing scholars have had difficulty accepting

⁷ Achtemeier, P. J. 1985. *Harper's Bible dictionary*. Includes index. (1st ed.) (Pages 51-52). Harper & Row: San Francisco

⁸ Ibid

at face value. Among these is the Temptation Seal, found among ancient Babylonian tablets, and presently in the British Museum, depicting the Garden of Eden story. In its center is a tree, with a man on the right, and a woman on the left plucking fruit. Behind the woman is a serpent, standing erect, as if whispering to her.⁹

The "Adam and Eve" seal depicts a naked man and a naked woman walking as if utterly downcast and broken-hearted, followed by a serpent. Presently in the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia, this seal was found in 1932 by Dr. E. A. Speiser near the bottom of the Tepe Gawra Mound, 12 miles north of Nineveh. He dated the seal at about 3500 B. C. and called it "strongly suggestive of the Adam and Eve story."¹⁰

A stele (or monument) discovered at the site of Ur in ancient Babylon depicts the various activities of Ur-Nammu, who was king of Ur from 2044 to 2007 B.C. According to the stele, he began construction of a great tower. According to a clay tablet unearthed at the same site by George Smith of the British Museum, the erection of the tower offended the Gods, who "threw down what they had built. They scattered them abroad, and made strange their speech."¹¹ This is very similar to the account of the tower of Babel found in Genesis 11:1-9.

Other archaeologists, including E. A. Speiser and S. N. Kramer of the University of Pennsylvania, and Oxford cuneiformist Oliver Gurney, have found evidence that the ancient Sumerians believed that there was a time when all mankind spoke the same language and that at a particular time; the God of Wisdom confounded their speech...¹²

The Biblical account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has been corroborated by surface surveys undertaken on the east side of the Dead Sea, which have revealed a series of five ancient cities dating back to the Middle Bronze era. There is strong evidence that various layers of the earth were disrupted and hurled high into the air. Because much of this material was bituminous pitch, these five cities were covered with it. The layers of sedimentary rock at these sites were moulded together by intense heat, as is evident on the top of nearby Jebel Usdum (Mount Sodom). Geologists have hypothesized that an oil

⁹ Hiss cites Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 24th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), p. 68

¹⁰ Hiss cites Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 24th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), p. 68-69

¹¹ Hiss cites Henry Halley p. 84 and Clifford A. Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1977), p. 29

¹² Hiss cites Clifford A. Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1977), p. 29-31

basin beneath the Dead Sea ignited and erupted, causing a rain of fire and debris upon these cities.^{13 14}

The fact that the writings of the Bible are authentic is further confirmed by the science of Archaeology. Archaeology is the scientific study of antiquity that seeks to uncover the remains of human history and activity. Traditionally archaeology has been principally an inductive science that focused upon describing the artifacts that were uncovered; today archaeology has become more of a deductive science seeking to provide an explanation for its discoveries. Archaeology is not an old science as one might presuppose but a relatively new science that deals with old things. Muncaster observes; “only in the last 50 years has archaeology approached things in a highly organised, sophisticated way that utilises many other branches of science.”¹⁵ Archaeology is both expensive and time consuming, and to date only a small fraction of the possible sites have been excavated. W C Kaiser points out

“Archaeology will continue to produce many exciting moments since it has been estimated that less than one percent of the available material on the tells of Israel have been excavated, not to mention those in the rest of the ancient Near East. Moreover, there are still great quantities of tablets and manuscripts in the basements of many universities that have conducted excavations over the years that still need decipherment and publication. In that sense, the future for this discipline could hardly be brighter.”¹⁶

In its short history, Archaeology has played a significant role in confirming the historical accuracy of the Bible. The following chart shows how archaeological discoveries have confirmed that the Bible was accurate in its detail even where in our previous knowledge it was once thought the Bible was in error. For example the Hittite culture is often spoken of in Genesis (Gen 10:15, 15:20; 23:7-20; 25:10; 49:32), for a long time it was thought by many that this culture was a myth then numerous Hittite artefacts were discovered that proved the Hittite culture’s existence. The Bible also speaks of camels as being a domesticated animal by the time of Abraham, however historians also thought this was a biblical error until paintings on the wall of a temple in Hatshepsut, near Thebes in Egypt were discovered that proved that camels were a domesticated animal at the time of Abraham. In a similar vein it was once that the Bible had falsely identified the Philistines as a people group then Philistine cities began to be discovered that prove their existence. Even more significantly it was once thought that the Torah could not have been written prior to 1450 B.C since it was thought that at the time no culture had developed the ability to write, then in 1902 the Code of Hammurabi was discovered that proved that writing predated the time of Moses¹⁷

One area where archaeological discoveries have proved invaluable is in confirming the historical accuracy of the Book of Genesis consider the following

¹³ Hiss cites Clifford A. Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1977), p. 29-31

¹⁴ Richard Hiss *Christian Evidences Archaeology and the Bible* found at http://www.grmi.org/renewal/Richard_Riss/evidences/4archaeology.html 23 February 2002

¹⁵ Muncaster page 229

¹⁶ Kaiser, W. C. (1997, c1996). *Hard sayings of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

¹⁷ Derived from Muncaster page 228-229

1. There are over 200 accounts of the great flood to be found in the cultures of the world. The Babylonians story of the flood is retold in the Gilgamesh Epic, the Akkadians relate the story of the flood in the Atrahasis Epic, the Aztec Indians, Choctaw Indians, the Bahners in China and even the Australian Aborigines tell of a universal flood. The Sumerians divided time into antediluvian and postdiluvian periods, they also tell of extraordinary long lives before the flood and drastically reduced lives after the flood.¹⁸ Supporting the flood accounts are fossil graveyards located all over the world, which “contain numbers of plants and creatures that are indigenous to many regions of the earth – altogether in single graves.”¹⁹
2. The Bible explains how until the tower of Babel was built there was only one language. In Genesis 11 at the tower of Babel “the Lord confused the language of all the earth and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over all the face of the earth” (V.9). An inscription placed by Nebuchadnezzar has been found on a tower that is referred to as the “tongue tower” that reads “the first which is the house of the earths base, the most ancient monument of Babylon, I built and furnished it...A former king built it but he did not complete its head. Since a remote time, people had abandoned it, without order expressing their words.”²⁰ This inscription tells of a tower where a king who lived prior to Nebuchadnezzar attempted to build a tower, but this project was never completed because while the building was in progress people began to speak words without order this apparently confused them leading to the project been abandoned.
3. For centuries the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were thought to be mythological then at an excavation at Tell Mardikh, now known as Ebla. 15000 tablets were discovered that specifically mention Sodom and Gomorrah.²¹
4. Evidence for the story of Joseph has been found on a tablet found in a fortress in present day Yemen, known as the Hadramaut Tablet that dates back to 1900.B.C. The tablet contains words that when translated state “We dwelt in this castle seven years if good life...then came seven years barren and burnt up. When one evil year had passed away, then another came to succeed it.”²² One ancient Yemenite inscription specifically refers to Joseph it reads “In thy name O God, of Hamyar, I Tajah, the daughter of Dzu Shefar, sent my steward to Joseph.”²³ Furthermore the Mari documents establish that the price for a slave during the 18th

¹⁸ Derived from Ian Vails “God’s Awesome Book” Companion ; Wycliffe Bible Translators . P.O. Box 13-347, Onehunga, Auckland page 7-8

¹⁹ Muncaster page 230

²⁰ I Vails “God’s Awesome Book” Companion ; Wycliffe Bible Translators . P.O. Box 13-347, Onehunga, Auckland 1132 Slide H30 page 9

²¹ Derived from McDowell, J., & Stewart, D. (1997, c1993). *Answers to tough questions: Skeptics ask about the Christian faith* (electronic ed.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Section The Bible

²² I Vails “God’s Awesome Book” Companion ; Wycliffe Bible Translators . P.O. Box 13-347, Onehunga, Auckland 1132 Slide H34 page 10

²³ I Vails “God’s Awesome Book” Companion ; Wycliffe Bible Translators . P.O. Box 13-347, Onehunga, Auckland 1132 Slide H35 page 10

and 19th centuries before Christ was 20 shekels of silver, which matches the price paid for Joseph.²⁴

Throughout the last century there has been heated debate as to whether the Exodus should be dated in the mid-fifteenth century B.C or at a date approximately 150 years later. “Assuming that Solomon built the temple ca. 970-960 B.C., the biblical numerical notices pertaining to the date of the Exodus in 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26 yield a mid-fifteenth century B.C. date for the Exodus.”²⁵ This date is in conflict with the date of about 1290 B.C that is generally accepted by most ancient historians, archaeologists and Old Testament scholars would favour. According to Geisler the generally accepted date is based on three assumptions: that the “Raamses” in Exodus 1:11 was named after Ramses the Great, that there were no building projects in the Nile Delta before 1300, and that there were no great civilizations in Canaan from the nineteenth century to the thirteenth”.²⁶ Archaeological evidence has now proved all three of these assumptions to be in error; Ramses the great was not the first ruler of this name, building projects in the Nile delta date back to the 1400s and archaeological evidence shows that the area was settled much earlier than once thought. Furthermore it has been archaeological tradition to date the chronology of the ancient world on the work of ancient historian Manetho. The problem is that we do not have any extant copies of Manetho work bur rather a series of quotations found in the writings of three other ancient writers whose work has survived. Archaeologists now believe that our understanding of Manetho’s dating system is six hundred years out because of three recent archaeological discoveries

- 1) An ancient papyrus written by Ipuwer, who was an Egyptian priest, tells the story of “two unique events: a series of plagues and the invasion of a foreign power. The plagues match very well with the record of Moses’ plagues in Exodus 7–12. It speaks of the river turning to blood (cf. 7:20), crops consumed (9:25), fire (vv. 23–24), and darkness (10:22). The final plague, which killed Pharaoh’s son, is referred to also.”²⁷
- 2) The El-Arish monolith informs the reader that there was period of darkness and suffering in Egypt under King Thom. The monolith then relates that “the Pharaoh “went out to battle against the friends of Apopi (the god of darkness),” though the army never returned”²⁸
- 3) A series of letters on clay known as the El-Amarna letters which contain correspondence between the rulers of Palestine and the Pharaohs Amenhotep III and his son Akhnaton that inform us

The Palestinians were concerned about an army approaching from the south called the Habiru, who were causing great destruction. On the basis of such a description, it has traditionally been held that these letters speak of the Israelites entering Canaan. Velikovsky shows that a closer look at these tablets reveals another picture entirely. First, Sumur can be identified as the city of Samaria, which was not built until after Solomon (1 Kings 16:24). Second, the “king of Ham” threatens to invade from the north, which seems to be a Hittite invasion. Third, none of the names in the letters match the names of rulers given in the Book of Joshua. In other words, the political situation is all wrong for these letters to have come from the time of the Exodus. If we

²⁴ Derived from I Vails “God’s Awesome Book” Companion ; Wycliffe Bible Translators . P.O. Box 13-347, Onehunga, Auckland 1132 Slide H36 page 10

²⁵ Bruce K Waltke article “Palestinian Artifactual Evidence Supporting the Early Date of Exodus” in Dallas Theological Seminary. (1972; 2002) *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 129* (Vol. 129, Page 33) Dallas Theological Seminary

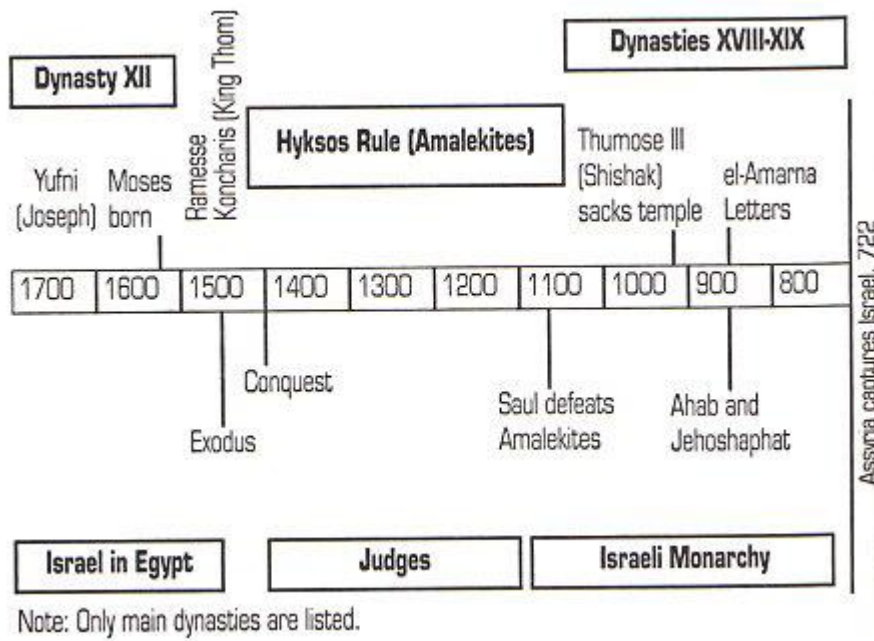
²⁶ Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (Page 188). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

²⁷ Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (Page 192). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

²⁸ Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (Page 193). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

move their date to the time when Ahab ruled from Samaria and was threatened by both the Moabites and the Hittites, then all of the names, places, and events can be located in Kings and Chronicles, even to the names of the generals of armies. But this dates Amenhotep III 500 years later than the standard chronology! Either the chronology is wrong or one has to maintain that history repeated itself exactly half a millennium later.²⁹

Archaeologist Velikovsky has used the above three archaeological discoveries to suggest that Manetho work is at least six hundred years out in its dating. In support of Velikovsky; Donovan A. Courvule has observed concerning the writings of Manetho that; “it was evidently not outside his thinking to give the names of the main line of kings as composing one dynasty and then to return on the time scale to pick up a line of secondary rulers as a distinct dynasty. Not only so, he did not hesitate to label these secondary rulers as kings... It would seem that herein lies a major factor in the acceptance of an erroneous and grossly expanded chronology of Egypt.”³⁰ Historians have traditionally viewed Manethos writings as been chronological i.e. “that each dynasty follows after the one before it when many dynasties list subrulers who lived at the same time as the preceding dynasty. Working out this new chronology places the Exodus about 1440 B.C. and makes the other periods of Israelite history fall in line with the Egyptian kings mentioned.”³¹ If Velikovsky theory is correct that the following diagram shows how Egypt and Israelite history would appear



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Time after time the archaeological discoveries have consistently confirmed that the Bible tells an accurate portrait of history. William F Albright has stated “Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details and has brought increased

²⁹Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (Page 195). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

³⁰Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (Page 196). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books. Sites Donovan A. Courvule, *The Exodus Problem and Its Ramifications* (Loma Linda, Calif.: Challenge Books, 1971), pp. 158–59.

³¹Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (Page 196). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

³² Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (Page 196). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history”³³ This is so much so that according to Muncaster that “the Bible is now a standard historical text for Archaeologists in the Middle East, Asia Minor and Macedonia”³⁴

³³ Quote found in I Vails “God’s Awesome Book” Companion ; Wycliffe Bible Translators . P.O. Box 13-347, Onehunga, Auckland 1132 Slide H2 page 5

³⁴ Muncaster page 229