

Archaeology and the Reliability of the Bible

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The Bible is an old book which makes extraordinary claims. As with any other book, we may ignore it, but once we begin to read it we have to react to it. There are two simple responses to the Bible: to reject it outright, or to accept it completely. There is a third way, the way which many follow whether they are predisposed in favour of the Bible or against it, that is to examine and test its claims. It is here that archaeology can help, as it can help in the evaluation of any book bequeathed to us by antiquity. On the other hand, there should be no doubt that archaeology offers no help in those areas where the Bible moves into a different dimension. It can neither confirm nor deny the Bible's claims that God parted the sea in front of the tribes of Israel at the Exodus, or that God spoke to Moses and the prophets, or that he raised Jesus alive from the tomb. Such things are beyond the scope of archaeology.

What archaeology can do is to bring answers to questions about the accuracy of the Bible in its presentation of ancient ways of life, customs and beliefs, about the history it relates, and about the transmission of its text. Sometimes it can bring information which links directly with a biblical statement, often its evidence is complementary, enlarging the overall scene in which the biblical actions took place. When placing the results of archaeology beside the Bible, or any other ancient book, it is important to realize that most ancient remains are mute, they give information only when they are interpreted, and interpretations can differ and change according to the attitudes of the interpreters and in the light of fresh discoveries. In the biblical world there is the inestimable advantage of written documents which survive from many periods and places. Most of them come from archaeological excavations, but the information they give is different in quality from that which a pot or a ruined building can offer. Ancient texts have a major part, therefore, in this study.

SCRIBAL ACCURACY

As an ancient book, the first question to ask of the Bible is, 'Have the authors' words passed down the centuries unaltered?' Nowadays the history of the biblical text can be traced as far back as the second and third centuries A.D. for the New Testament, and the first century B.C. for the Old Testament. Here no more need be said than that the Greek text of the New Testament is reckoned to be 99% as it left its authors' pens, and that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament has been transmitted with great accuracy for the past two thousand years. For the books of the Old Testament, two thousand years is only a part of their history, albeit the greater part. In the absence of Hebrew manuscripts much older than 100 B.C., what can be said about the state of the biblical books before that date? Obviously, without actual manuscripts, anything that is said is hypothetical at best, and may be little more than a guess. While ancient texts cannot help directly in this matter, they can show how the scribes worked and, for some cultures, although not for Israel, how books were made and preserved.

Scribes were men, and, like us, made mistakes. Examples are not hard to find in the numerous documents of ancient times. However, they knew they were liable to error, and they had methods of checking and correcting. Knowing how scribes could produce faulty manuscripts

has led many scholars to allege the existence of many mistakes in the biblical text. Sometimes there are very good reasons for these allegations, often, one regrets to say, they have been made too easily. Sometimes discovery of documents from biblical times can clarify particular cases.

A striking example is the writing of foreign names. If a stranger comes, speaking a language you do not know, you may find it difficult to write his name (the names the Russian leader Gorbachoff, or the Chinese Deng Hsiao Ping variously spelt in our newspapers show this). And after a few years it does not matter exactly what the name was. The Hebrew scribes are accused of such an attitude. When they met foreign names in the biblical texts they were copying, they did not take much care to write accurately what was meaningless to them. Evidence to support this view comes from comparing the Hebrew manuscripts with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, and from looking at the way some of the names were written in texts in their own languages. Some examples will make this clear. The first comes from the Book of Esther.

In that story the villain is Haman, the vizier of king Xerxes. After his downfall and execution, his ten sons were also killed. The author of Esther gave their names, which are certainly not Hebrew, but are presumably intended to be Persian (9:7-9). First stands *Parshandatha*. In the Hebrew text the name is quite clear. In the Septuagint, however, the manuscripts vary considerably in the way they write this name, and others in Esther. For the Hebrew *parshandatha* one has *pharsannestain*, another *pharsanestan*, while the famous Codex Vaticanus makes it into two names *pharsan* and *nestain*. This variation is used as the

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basis of an argument that the Hebrew reflection of the name may be unreliable, and so proper analysis of this and other names will be hindered. In fact, it is the Greek renderings only which are corrupt in this case. The Hebrew *parshandatha* is an accurate transcription of an Old Persian name. Physical proof of this is afforded by a stone cylinder seal which has been in the British Museum for a hundred years. It belonged to a Persian who had his name engraved on it in the *lingua franca* of the day, Aramaic. The Aramaic letters are basically the same as the Hebrew, and the name is identical with the name of Haman's eldest son except for the final a: Esther *parshandatha*, seal *prshndt*. Far from careless inattention characterizing the Hebrew scribes' attitude to an alien name, this example illustrates their great care. The same care can be demonstrated for other foreign names in the Old Testament, too. Assyrian royal names, Tiglath-pileser, Sargon, Esarhaddon, are not inexact or inadequate representations of the native forms, as commentators have claimed, but precise renderings of the Assyrian dialect of their period. Out of such detailed investigation arises a greater respect for the work of the Hebrew scribes, and indisputable evidence of their accuracy in copying the biblical texts.

THE GOLDEN TEMPLE

From the question of how accurately the text has been transmitted, the next stage in evaluating an ancient book is to inquire into its content. Are the events it narrates plausible, do they agree with knowledge available at present about the ages it describes? In many cases archaeological research has uncovered traces of human activity and products which agree with the sense of the Bible. One case is the gradual change from the use of bronze to the use of iron in the years of Israel's Exodus and settlement in Canaan. When relating the history of those times, the biblical authors mention iron in a way which shows it was unusual (the iron

bed of King Og, Dt. 3:11; the iron chariots of the Canaanites, Josh. 17:16, 18; Judg. 1:19; 4:3, 13). In archaeological terms this is the period of the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Both ancient texts and objects unearthed indicate that iron was known in the Late Bronze Age, as a rare and valuable metal, used sparingly until the era of the Iron Age was over a century old.

One of the more surprising assertions of the Israelite historians is that king Solomon, when he had built the temple in Jerusalem, covered the inside of it with gold. To the modern mind this is incredible. In some cathedrals gold-plated altar-pieces are to be seen, but to envisage entering a building like King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and finding it entirely covered with gold, walls, ceiling and floor, is almost beyond imagination. Indeed modern biblical commentators have treated the claim of 1 Kings 6:21, 22 with great scepticism. The account is grossly exaggerated, they allege, the product of exuberant imagination. Some suppose that the parts of the carved decoration were gilded, or allow that the altar alone may have had a plating of gold. Yet before this ancient report is dismissed out of hand, it is surely right, both to be fair to the text, and to conform to the 'scientific' attitude of the age, to review the use of gold in antiquity and especially in the decoration of temples.

Gold is commonly devoted to the service of the gods men worship. Today golden objects adorn statues and pictures in Roman Catholic and eastern churches, the Sikhs have their Golden Temple at Amritsar, the Buddhists the Shwe Dagon Temple in Burma where pilgrims gain merit by applying gold leaf to the buildings. In classical times Athens was famous for Pheidias' statue of Athene Parthenos. It was made of ivory covered with moulded plates of gold which could be detached, and eventually were taken away to pay the city's conqueror. The weight of gold needed for that plating is reported as forty Attic talents, that is, a little over 1,000 kg. Earlier than fifth century Athens, the most obvious place to seek information about the use of gold is Egypt. The treasures of Tutankhamun's tomb help us to realize what Babylonian kings meant when they wrote to the pharaohs, 'Gold is like dust in your hand'. Among the furniture surrounding the dead pharaoh were four wooden shrines which fitted each inside the next. Within the smallest was the stone sarcophagus containing the coffins which held the king's body. The innermost coffin is made of solid gold, and beneath its lid lay the dead Tutankhamun, his face covered with the famous gold mask. In addition to the gold of the coffin and the mask, the four wooden shrines were covered with thin sheets of gold inside and outside. They supply the closest comparison to the golden interior of Solomon's Temple which can be seen today. They are still, nevertheless, rather different from a stone-built wood-panelled temple, covered with gold.

Even for that apparent extravagance, Egypt supplies evidence. While surveying a temple at Karnak, the French Egyptologist Pierre Lacau observed series of holes and slits in the stonework. They had no part in the construction of the building, nor did they serve any decorative purpose. After he had read the inscriptions of Thuthmosis III who built the temple about 1450 B.C., Lacau concluded that these holes and slits had been cut to enable parts of the building to be covered with sheets of gold, as the king described. Twelve columns carved to represent bundles of papyrus reeds, each about 11 feet high, and fourteen others each rising over 50 feet were plated with gold in this way, as well as various doorways and shrines. The sources imply that there were other temples in Egypt similarly adorned. From Assyrian and Babylonian texts references to the same sort of decoration can be collected, but no physical evidence survives in the cities of Mesopotamia.

In this example the archaeological discoveries do not relate to Solomon's Temple directly at all. They exist and can be studied in their own right as phenomena of ancient religious

practices and of ancient values. What they provide for the inquirer who is seeking to evaluate the biblical record is independent ancient examples against which to set the description of King Solomon's Temple. When the decoration of that Temple is studied in its ancient context, the grounds for scepticism disappear; it becomes entirely feasible.

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A MIRACLE

Even if reports that sound exaggerated to modern ears, like the gold plating of Solomon's Temple, become credible in the light of archaeology, there remain episodes within the 'historical' books of the Old Testament which are major obstacles to the modern mind. Within a sober account of a battle a divine intervention is factually asserted. Joshua 10:9 relates, 'After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua took them (the Amorites) by surprise. The Lord threw them into confusion before Israel, who defeated them in a great victory at Gibeon', and then, verse 11, 'As they fled before Israel...the Lord hurled large hailstones down on them from the sky.'

Archaeology can offer nothing that relates to this particular incident, and even if the discarded weapons of the defeated Amorites were located—and it would be hard to prove they belonged to the Amorites, or that their owners were defeated—there would be no way to establish that their defeat was the result of divinely-sent panic and hailstones!

The events in Joshua's war against the Amorites are typical of several narratives. Among biblical scholars there is a tendency to dismiss records containing this sort of 'miraculous' element as unhistorical. Here, again, other ancient documents supply analogies to the biblical reports which warn against minimizing their value. One instance is especially clear, and it can draw on written sources and, to a small extent, physical remains.

In 2 Kings 18, 19 stands the account of Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah, the failure of the Assyrian king to capture Jerusalem, and his return to Nineveh after his army had been destroyed. Since 1851 it has been possible to set the account given by Sennacherib in his own, contemporary, inscriptions beside the biblical text. (There are various problems of detail in both accounts which are not relevant here.) In addition to the written records there is the well-known series of sculptures from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh illustrating the siege and capture of the town of Lachish in Judah. Notice in passing that the Assyrian 'annals' of Sennacherib do not mention Lachish at all, but Sennacherib's presence there is reported in 2 Kings 18:14, 17; cf. 19:8. No reliefs were found at Nineveh celebrating the capture of Jerusalem, indeed the Lachish reliefs seem to have occupied the place of honour. Sennacherib's 'annals' tell how Jerusalem was besieged, yet give no report of its capture or surrender, saying, rather, that Hezekiah sent tribute after Sennacherib to Nineveh. A correlation is often, and correctly, made with the Hebrew history. In that is revealed the reason for Sennacherib's return to his capital without the final triumph over Hezekiah which would be the normal conclusion of such a campaign as he conducted. 2 Kings 19:35, 36 read, 'That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there'.

To many readers that is a totally unacceptable explanation; 'miracles don't happen'. Either a rational explanation is to be found, the favourite being that plague was spread by rats, said by

Herodotus, the Greek historian of the fifth century B.C. to have gnawed the bowstrings of an Assyrian army, or these verses are to be treated as theological invention, part of the wholly fictional account of the deliverance of Jerusalem, made up many years after Sennacherib had actually captured the city. At present archaeological excavations in Jerusalem have not discovered traces of the Assyrian siege or of an Assyrian capture. Clear signs have been found of the Babylonians' attack in 587 B.C. In a capital city, continuously occupied, the debris from an enemy's entry might be cleared away, and excavations in Jerusalem have been quite limited, so the evidence may not yet have come to light. In contrast, at Lachish two expeditions have obtained fairly conclusive evidence of the Assyrian siege, and of later occupation. Not only are there signs of extensive destruction, the Israeli excavators claim to have found one of the ramps of stones up which the Assyrian siege-engines were rolled in order to begin the destruction. Every type of evidence agrees that Lachish was captured. On the other hand, the silence of the Assyrian sources, the positive biblical statements, and perhaps the archaeological evidence, point to the escape of Jerusalem. In the face of this evidence, which is quite strong, what is to be thought about the fate of the Assyrian army? Does the presence of a 'miracle story' undermine the historical worth of the whole narrative?

Ancient texts give helpful answers to these questions. The occurrence of divine intervention in human warfare was acceptable to their authors. Several parallels exist for the type of narrative Joshua 10 exemplifies, where severe meteorological events help one army. For the victors it is obviously their god who is at work. Closer to the record of the Assyrian army's fate are two reports in the 'annals' of Sennacherib's grandson Ashurbanipal, from about 640 B.C. An enemy attacked the Assyrian frontier somewhere in Turkey and was repulsed, not by the might of Assyrian arms, but by the intervention of the god of Assyria, Ashur. He overcame the enemy king, caused 'his body to burn with searing heat', and fire fell from heaven to burn his camp. The enemy recovered, attacked again, was overwhelmed by the Assyrian god once more, and, driven mad with a hideous disease, he died. Ashurbanipal evidently included these events in his 'annals' as part of the achievement of his reign as much as any campaign his army won by its own prowess. Nothing implies there was anything less factual about the triumph obtained with supernatural aid than about any others. Were there to be such events today, historians would express them in different terms—although many people speak of the 'miracle of Dunkirk.' With proper attention to the ancient manner of expression the ancient accounts of divine intervention can be accepted as records of events which the ancient writers could not, or did

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not wish to explain in any other way. There are no good grounds for excising them from the historical narratives or for dismissing them as folk-lore or the inventions of ancient theologians. To go further to explain the way in which the Assyrians army was killed is to speculate beyond the limits of the evidence.

Archaeology, in providing historical compositions contemporary with the Hebrew ones, now enables us to evaluate passages of Hebrew history more positively and productively than was customary when they were studied in isolation. They can be viewed as more reliable records than many had supposed.

The three contributions of archaeology to supporting the trustworthiness of the Bible described in this essay are examples selected to demonstrate the results which researches in this subject may bring. It would not be proper, however, to leave the impression that every biblical statement or concept can be illumined in this way, nor that every archaeological

discovery brings such positive aid. As mentioned already, archaeological finds can tell nothing about the words or actions of God, and, at a more mundane level they cannot give examples of ancient Israelite clothing or wooden furniture because such materials perish when they are buried in the damp soil of Palestine. Further, there are some discoveries which are hard to reconcile with the biblical text.

Among the most notorious are the apparent absence of a city at Jericho in the time of Joshua, and the equal absence of any traces of occupation at Ai in the same period. It is easy to conclude that the archaeological evidence is final, and so treat the biblical narratives as the products of popular imagination. Without entering into detailed discussion of these problems, it should be noted that the Jericho problem depends quite heavily upon the dating of Late Bronze Age pottery found there and the date given for the Israelite Conquest, and upon the traditional image of Jericho as a large fortified city. As for Ai, the fact that the name itself means 'ruin' makes the explanation that local people took refuge in a long abandoned but strategic stronghold still attractive.

To set out to seek to 'prove' the Bible from archaeology is a foolish and misconceived task. Archaeology and the Bible are seen to complement each other the more the ancient near east is studied with a positive attitude. Often archaeological discoveries will add to the overall context of the Bible, some will show that the biblical statements or narratives could be true or correct, without being able to prove that they are so, and a few will relate closely to the biblical text, demonstrating its accuracy in various respects. With regard to the trustworthiness of the Bible, therefore, archaeology is a useful tool for setting the text in its context and so pointing to a fuller evaluation. The better that context is understood, the more trustworthy the Bible appears as an ancient book. The claims it makes in the spiritual realm can only be proved trustworthy by the exercise of faith, a situation as true in biblical times as it is today.

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