

DIGGING FOR INSIGHTS

Using Archaeology to Study the Bible

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PREFACE

How does archaeology help us understand the Bible? What are its strengths and its limitations? How can we learn to evaluate the claims that archaeologists make about the Bible? How can we evaluate archaeology critically, that is, distinguish data from interpretation and speculation? These are some of the questions we will attempt to address in this volume.

After speaking about the methods and contributions of archaeology in general, we will consider what archaeology can teach us about various aspects of life in biblical times. We will then conclude with some warnings against bias and misuse of archaeology, both by supporters and critics of the Bible.

All of the chapters are summaries, designed for the non-professional, with very limited footnotes and documentation. For the most part, these summaries are based on popular reports rather than technical studies. Some of the more technical material has been placed in the appendices. Additional reading is suggested at the ends of chapters and in the final bibliography. Measurements are usually rounded off from meters to feet and from grams to pounds.

What is archaeology? What do archaeologists do? Most people have little idea. If they have a notion, it is likely to be far removed from reality. If the average person on the street were asked to name a famous archaeologist, he or she might name a movie “archaeologist” like Indiana Jones, or Rick O’Connell and Evie Carnahan-O’Connell, or maybe Lara Croft, tomb raider. They often imagine whip-cracking heroes rescuing beautiful women or being rescued by them. Or they recall archaeologists battling ancient curses from the mummies they have disturbed, fighting evil Nazis bent on controlling the world, and finding mounds of jewels and gold. Maybe they even find treasures with magic powers like the ark of the covenant or the holy grail. What a life!

The reality, of course, is quite different. Real archaeologists seldom find treasures of silver and gold. (A fabulous treasure hoard has never been found in Israel, and even in Egypt there has been only one, the tomb of King Tut.) Archaeologists rarely, if ever, have to engage in running gun battles with evil rivals. Their major hardships are enduring hot, dirty conditions while digging and spending long hours at a desk studying and publishing their finds. For the most part, their finds are rows and piles of stones, various colors of dirt, and tons of broken pottery. Ancient people seldom left good things behind, and when they did, it was almost never on purpose. What archaeologists find are mostly the ruins: the rejects and the wreckage of life. In short, archaeology is sorting through people’s garbage in a systematic, scientific way.

The Study of Ancient Things

The word *archaeology* means the study of ancient things. In the narrow sense, archaeology is the discovery and analysis of the material remains of ancient cultures. The term is sometimes used in a

wider sense, which includes the study of written records from the past. In this sense it overlaps with ancient history. Since some of the written records of ancient times were recovered by archaeological excavations, we will touch on such documents briefly, but in this book we will be concerned primarily with the physical remains from ancient cultures, such as buildings, tombs and graves, sewers and toilets, pottery, tools and weapons, coins, and idols.

As we are using the term here, *archaeology* first of all refers to a method for recovering the past. Second, it refers to the data and interpretations produced by that method.

Some archaeological treasures are discovered accidentally by construction workers digging ditches or intentionally by thieves and looters rummaging through archaeological sites, but we would not call bulldozing sites or robbing tombs archaeology. *Archaeology* is a carefully planned recovery of ancient remains. We may define it as the recovery of the past by systematically discovering, recording, preserving, analyzing, and publishing remains that have survived from past civilizations. Biblical archaeology is applying the results that are obtained by such methods to the study of the Bible.

To carry out a successful archaeological project, an archaeologist (or more likely a team of archaeologists) needs a site to excavate; a set of goals for the excavation; a plan for the excavation; permission to excavate the site; a support staff of supervisors, workers, and researchers; and enough money to fund the project. A more detailed summary of this process is provided in appendix I. It is important to read this to be aware of the limitations of archaeological methods.

Before we consider specific contributions of archaeology to the study of the Bible, we must consider in a more general way the strengths and weaknesses of archaeology as a tool for Bible study.

The Limitations of Archaeology

Though it can provide some verification of historical persons and events, archaeology does not prove or disprove the Bible. By and large, it cannot provide the type of information to do that. It can show that a city was destroyed at Jericho, but it normally does not

provide information about who did it or whether it happened in a natural earthquake or a divinely timed one. Many people and events in the Bible are not of the type that would make much of an impression in the archaeological record. The patriarchs, for example, who are extremely important persons in biblical history, were not great kings who left vast palaces. Also, Jesus' ministry would not have produced a lot of archaeological evidence.

One of the greatest weaknesses of archaeology in reconstructing history is that it works with very limited evidence. Books often cite "the 2 percent rule." Archaeologists excavate 2 percent of the area of 2 percent of the sites and find 2 percent of what was once there. In destructions of sites, often all that remains are ruins, broken pottery, and anything that was not worth carting away. The evidence thus is relatively skimpy, and what remains is often jumbled. The site may have been damaged by erosion, quarrying, the mining of the site for building materials that could be reused, and the leveling of previous strata to prepare for new construction. In trying to reconstruct the history of the site, the archaeologist has only a tiny fraction of the evidence.

A second weakness is that the published results of the excavation contain a great deal of subjective interpretation. Some of this is inevitable because of the relatively sparse evidence. One of the most important things for readers of this book to learn is how to distinguish the evidence from the interpretation of the evidence. The evidence, for example, might be some burned buildings and broken pottery. Assigning a date to the building and suggesting how the building was destroyed is interpretation, often strongly influenced by written records or the excavator's biases. Two experts looking at the same data may produce very different interpretations. The interpretations may be influenced by the archaeologists' presuppositions and pet theories (theological or archaeological). An archaeologist who approaches the data looking for evidence to support a preconceived notion is likely to find it. (See chapter II for further discussion of the role of bias in archaeology.)

Sometimes other factors compound the uncertainty of interpretation. Even the identity of the site may be uncertain (for example, the locations of Bethel and Ai are disputed). All dating methods

have their limitations. The archaeologist may be approaching the data with faulty assumptions or may be misled by faulty data or bad interpretations from previous excavations. We will try to provide specific examples in the chapters that follow.

The biases of archaeologists mean that even the very phrase *biblical archaeology* is now the subject of debate. Many archaeologists are embarrassed to have the name of their discipline associated with the Bible—too religious and unsophisticated for them. Others, of course, have a great interest in the Bible and may even have a specific aim of corroborating at least the basic historicity of the Bible. This latter view, of course, is much out of favor with the archaeological establishment today. Excavations undertaken with openly stated biblical aims are rare today. If archaeologists have specific biblically oriented goals, in most cases these would not be publicly acknowledged. This is a great change from the early 20th century when excavations with a specific biblical agenda were undertaken by Christian archaeologists such as William Albright and his school. Israeli archaeologists, even the secular, were very interested in biblical history as part of the heritage of their people. Very few of these men and women had a high view of the inerrancy of Scripture, but they believed the Bible had a basic historical core.

The ascent of negative critical views of Scripture has had a great impact on archaeology. Most archaeologists today accept moderate to extremely critical views of the Bible. The school known as minimalists, which believes that virtually nothing in the Old Testament is historical, influences a much larger segment of archaeology today than it did in the past. It is clear that some are trying to distance themselves from the embarrassment of a fundamentalist or orthodox past. Those who work in the academic world seek respectability and may bend to professional peer pressure. Sometimes the motivation is not anti-religious but simply a turn away from a primarily historical interest to more scientific and anthropological interests. Much support for archaeology in Israel still comes from people and institutions with a biblical interest. But the recent change of name of the periodical *Biblical Archaeologist* to *Near Eastern Archaeology* is a fitting indication of the shift from the overtly biblical archaeology of the

early 20th century toward the historical minimalism in archaeology of the 21st century. Today new archaeological applications to the Bible will come more often from “arm-chair applications” of data obtained by secularly motivated excavations rather than from those undertaken with a specific biblical interest.

Archaeology can deal only with physical remains. It cannot evaluate spiritual things. For example, it can provide evidence that Jerusalem was destroyed around 586 B.C. and again around A.D. 70, but it cannot provide any evidence for the spiritual meaning of these events as judgments of God. Even in explaining the earthly causes of these events, we are almost entirely dependent on written records from the time.

Consider the archaeological evidence for two men, Herod the Great and Jesus of Nazareth. We have abundant evidence of the greatness of Herod in his palaces at Masada and his burial site at the Herodium. Traces remain of his great works at Caesarea and Samaria. Even though the temple he built was destroyed, the temple platform that remains is dramatic proof of his greatness as a builder. What would be the evidence for the great works of Jesus? The upper room that Jesus borrowed for the Last Supper has vanished. The evidence of his resurrection would be an empty tomb, of which there are many in Jerusalem. Nothing that remains today would show why the tomb was empty. The evidence of his crucifixion would be three barely traceable postholes in the ground. And yet Herod is gone and by and large forgotten, known by most for nothing except killing the babies of Bethlehem. The result of Christ’s work endures, not because of physical remains that it has left but because of the work of the Spirit through the Word that remains.

Tutankhamen, a.k.a. King Tut, a short-lived pharaoh who was mediocre at best, left what is perhaps the most fabulous treasure trove ever found. The baby of Bethlehem left only an empty manger in a deserted stable. Yet the effect that this baby has on the world is immeasurably greater than that of King Tut.

We should not expect too much from archaeology since it cannot deal with the most important issues in the Bible. Nevertheless, it is not without value. In Israel few treasures are found, mostly foundations and pottery. But they contribute to the understanding