

Archaeology and the Biblical Record—Part 1

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K. A. Kitchen, Lecturer in Egyptian and Coptic in the School of Archaeology and Oriental Studies at the University of Liverpool, was certainly correct when he wrote that the Bible and archaeology “remains a theme of unending fascination.”¹ Biblical archaeology is fascinating both for what it studies (the Bible and ancient remains) and the results (how these fit together in the belief system of Christians).

Human interest in things of the past has existed since there has been history. Indications of “archaeological” or antiquities interest goes back into very early times. Nabonidus, king of Babylon, with his co-regent son Belshazzar, was actively involved in archaeological research when Babylon fell to the Persians more than 500 years before Christ’s birth. Assyrian kings collected tablets from earlier times and Ashur-bani-pal (died 626 B.C.) boasted of his ability to read and understand ancient cuneiform script. Modern involvement with what became known as “biblical archaeology” did not become a serious activity until the famous Assyrian palaces began to be excavated in the 1840s, continuing up to present times. The establishment of the nation of Israel led to a great increase in archaeological activity in Israel.² Since that time there has been somewhat of an explosion of interest in biblical archaeology, with numerous scholarly journals and periodicals devoted to the subject.³ Even marine or underwater archaeology is now a scientific discipline.

Defining Archaeology

How do we define archaeology? Archaeology has been defined by different writers in slightly different ways. Consider the following definitions, all of which give an idea of what archaeology does:

Archaeology is simply the recovery of man’s past by systematically discovering, recording and studying the surviving material remains that he has left behind.⁴

Archaeology is concerned with the recovery of the remains of ancient civilizations.⁵

The study and historical interpretation of *all* the material remains that vanished civilizations have left in the ground.⁶

The study of the things men made and did, in order that their whole way of life may be understood.⁷

The systematic recovery, analysis, and interpretation of the surviving evidence of human activity.⁸

That branch of knowledge which takes cognizance of past civilizations, and investigates their history in all fields, by means of remains of art, architecture, monuments, inscriptions, literature, language, implements, customs, and all other examples which have survived.⁹

In *Archaeology, Artifacts and the Bible*, British scholar P. R. S. Morey even wrote, tongue-in-cheek, that “Archaeology is the study of durable rubbish.”¹⁰ The *New American Standard Open Bible* defines *biblical* archaeology as “a study based on the excavation, decipherment and critical evaluation of the records of the past as they affect the Bible” (1978, p. 1257).

There has been much interest in biblical archaeology among Christians whose attention to archaeology is primarily apologetic; that is, to explore how it confirms the biblical record.

In this discussion we will address this theme, explaining why, on the one hand, it is logically impossible for archaeology to prove everything true in the Bible while, on the other hand, archaeology does provide amazing confirmations of Scripture. Such confirmation is hardly surprising to the one who knows the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, but it has been an unexpected occurrence to those who have believed the Bible is merely the record of fallible men. Such critics had expected archaeology would “disprove” Christian claims in many areas. But Kitchen is correct in stating that, as far as orthodox Christianity is concerned, it has nothing to fear from any “soundly-based and fair-minded intellectual inquiry” from archaeology or any other field.¹¹ (As Kitchen observes, anything less than a soundly based and fair-minded investigation is invalid by definition.)

In what way does archaeology confirm the biblical record? Primarily by demonstrating that it is trustworthy where it *can* be tested. Obviously, biblical claims cannot be tested everywhere. Archaeology cannot be expected to confirm *every* statement of biblical history, geography, or culture because the amount of information archaeology has uncovered is still relatively small. Further, dealing as it does with material remains, archaeology can hardly prove the spiritual claims of the Bible, since those claims must be established independently by other means. Nor can archaeology prove that literally everything in the Bible happened in just the way the Bible says it did. Again, the extensive amount of data necessary for such a confirmation is simply not available and probably never will be.

Consider the comments of Dr. Walter Kaiser, Jr., concerning chronological uncertainties in one Old Testament passage: “This solution does not help us with the synchronisms given with Hoshea in 2 Kings 18:1, 9, 10. In fact, Edwin Thiele, that great solver of every other synchronism and chronological fact in the chronologies of the Hebrew kings simply gave up when he came to this one in his doctoral study submitted to the University of Chicago.”¹² We use this as an example to show that we do not have solutions to every historical problem. What we do have is the knowledge that there are no final or finally unsolvable problems because the Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God. Future archaeological work will continue to prove the Scriptures are trustworthy.

The significant point is this: when sufficient factual information becomes known, and is properly interpreted, it always confirms the biblical record. In cases where a discovery initially seems not to confirm the Bible, sufficient factual data is never encountered in order to *disprove* a biblical statement. Given the thousands of minute details in the Bible that archaeology has the *opportunity* to disprove, this confirmation of the biblical record is striking. As scientist and Christian apologist Dr. Henry M. Morris points out, “It must be extremely significant that, in view of the great mass of corroborative evidence regarding the biblical history of these periods, there exists today not one unquestionable find of archaeology that proves the Bible to be in error at any point.”¹³

The importance of archaeological data in confirmation of the biblical record is evident when we understand that such material confirmation should also logically lead one to have confidence in its spiritual teachings. Those who believe that the Bible is unreliable in historical matters can hardly be expected to accept its teachings in spiritual matters. A famous cookbook may promise culinary delights that are heavenly, but if the recipe ingredients are wrong, it won't matter. Thus, “Although confirmation of one kind of truth (historical) does not demonstrate the validity of another kind of truth (theological), the veracity of the historical narrative of Scripture lends credence to the theological message. Those who do not accept the historical accuracy of the Bible find it easier to dismiss its theological claims.”¹⁴

(to be continued)

Notes:

- ¹ K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World: The Bible and Archeology Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), p. 7.
- ² Keith N. Schoville, *Biblical Archeology in Focus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 80.
- ³ E.g., *Biblical Archeology Review*, *The Biblical Archeologist*, *Bible and Spade*, *American Journal of Archeology*, *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, *Israel Exploration Journal*, *The Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, *The Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine*, as well as encyclopedias such as *Encyclopedia of Archeological Excavations in the Holy Land*.
- ⁴ Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World*, p. 9.
- ⁵ Edwin Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures* (New York: J. B. Lippencott, 1972), p. 17.
- ⁶ In Schoville, p. 16.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Joseph P. Free, revised and expanded by Howard F. Vos, *Archeology and Bible History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. IX.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 173.
- ¹² Walter Kaiser, "The Promise of Isaiah 14 and the Single-Meaning Hermeneutic" in John Ankerberg, John Weldon, *The Case for Jesus the Messiah* (Chattanooga, TN: The John Ankerberg Evangelistic Association, 1989), p. 144.
- ¹³ Citing Henry Morris, *The Bible and Modern Science* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1956, rev.), p. 95, in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Ca: Here's Life, 1979 rev.), p. 70.
- ¹⁴ Free and Vos, p. 13.