THE BIBLE & ARCHAEOLOGY

Bringing New Light to Ancient Scriptures

A Tactical Christianity Book

R. Herbert

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By R. Herbert

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Note that all *italicized* emphases in quotations from the Bible have been added by the author.

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Preface

Many people coming to this book will come with the question "Does archaeology prove the Bible" and the answer that almost any archaeologist would give is "No, it does not." This is simply because archaeology is not a hard science like physics, for example, that can "prove" light travels faster than sound, or chemistry which can prove that one chemical compound will react a certain way with another. Archaeology does not prove anything – it simply produces data relative to the past and attempts to interpret that information. Whether we believe the conclusions depends on us. The point is, archaeological evidence is relative – you and I may believe it and consider it proof of what the Bible says, but someone else might not. This is no different from the way lawyers may present the evidence for their case in a court of law, but the jury may or may not find the evidence convincing.

Nevertheless, what this book will show is that archaeology does provide direct evidence for many aspects of the Bible – including places, objects, events and even people. For example, we have archaeological or historical evidence of over eighty individuals mentioned in the books of the Bible – not only minor characters mentioned in passing, but also major characters of great significance in the biblical story. Archaeology has confirmed, or at least helped us see the likelihood of so many things mentioned in the Scriptures that it can give those who do not choose to deny the evidence a confidence in the reality of much of the biblical record that is, to put it in legal terms, "beyond reasonable doubt."

Beyond the large amount of direct evidence that archaeology has recovered regarding things mentioned in the Scriptures, archaeologists have also brought to light massive amounts of "indirect" evidence (information about conditions of the time, or similar situations, things, or events) that helps us better understand what is said in the Bible.

To cover all the finds archaeologists have made that relate to the Bible directly and indirectly would take many books. This volume is simply a brief survey of the kinds of information archaeology is able to provide us to better understand the biblical stories while dispelling some popularly held beliefs about supposed "proofs" of the Bible that are often claimed to have been found. The book is organized chronologically – beginning with the earliest stories of the Bible, and moving through time up to the era of the New Testament.

Part One shows that for the earliest era we have little or no direct evidence of the things the Bible mentions – which is to be expected, as we will see – but archaeology does provide us with a wealth of indirect evidence that greatly increases our understanding of this earliest period of biblical history.

In Part Two, which begins with Israel's entry into the Promised Land, we begin to find direct evidence of things mentioned in the Bible. The sheer number of the places, objects, events, and people that can be archaeologically attested is almost startling to anyone who is not familiar with the field.

Although it is true that archaeology may not prove the Bible to everyone's satisfaction, it is undeniable that it can shine new light on the ancient Scriptures – helping us to better understand the Bible in hundreds of ways. For those who are willing to look carefully at its findings, it can also amaze and encourage us through the wealth of factual evidence for the Bible that it does provide. Welcome to the past!

Chronological Chart

APPROX. DATES	TIME PERIOD *	BIBLICAL ERAS
3300-2900 BC	Early Bronze I	
2900-2600 BC	Early Bronze II	
2600-2300 BC	Early Bronze III	
2300-2200 BC	Early Bronze IV	
2200-1800 BC	Middle Bronze I	Patriarchs
1800-1650 BC	Middle Bronze II A	
1650-1550 BC	Middle Bronze II B	
1550-1400 BC	Late Bronze I	
1400-1300 BC	Late Bronze II A	
1300-1200 BC	Late Bronze II B	
1200-1150 BC	Iron Age IA	Exodus
1150-1000 BC	Iron Age I B	Judges
1000-900 BC	Iron Age II A	United Monarchy
900-800 BC	Iron Age II B	Divided Monarchy
800-586 BC	Iron Age II C	Exiles
586-332 BC	Persian	Return
332-142 BC	Hellenistic I	
142- 63 BC	Hellenistic II	
63 BC- AD 70	Roman / Herodian	New Testament

*For more details, see the Appendix: Archaeology and Chronology

Introduction:
Finding the Past

There is no denying the romance of archaeology in most people's eyes. Blockbuster movies of intrepid explorers hunting for precious artifacts have created an "Indiana Jones" persona in the popular imagination which is fun, but very largely fictional. Those who have actually participated in or conducted archaeological surveys and excavation know the truth can be very different.

Real archaeology more often than not involves years of in-depth training, extensive planning for each project, dealing with seemingly endless bureaucracy, fund raising, and other non-glamorous activities even before the hard (and often very hot, cold, or wet) work begins. But despite the less adventurous aspects of much real archaeology, the study of the past is still enormously exciting and rewarding in what it can teach us.

This is especially true of "biblical archaeology." Although this term is sometimes rejected because many earlier (and some modern) researchers have stressed trying to "prove" the Bible over looking to see what the evidence actually shows; the application of archaeological data to what the Bible states can be immensely valuable in helping us better understand the Scriptures and better appreciating those aspects of the Bible that can be confirmed. In this Introduction we will briefly look at how archaeology developed and how it does what it does to recover the past.

The First Archaeologist and Now

The first archaeologist – at least the first we have evidence of – is generally agreed to have been Nabonidus, the last king of the Babylonian empire, who ruled c. 556–539 BC. In a text called the Nabonidus Cylinder which was discovered by modern archaeologists, this king tells how he restored several temples in

and around what is modern-day Iraq. Interestingly, these ancient restorations involved excavation that was at least partially archaeological in its aim.

In order to rebuild a temple that was already ancient in Nabonidus' day, its foundations were often excavated so that it could be restored according to its original plan. During his rebuilding of several temples, Nabonidus found inscriptions and artifacts left in their foundations by their original builders. The king displayed great interest in this evidence from the past, and his level of interest is seen in that he also excavated at least one non-religious building – the palace of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (c. 2254–2218 BC).

From a modern perspective, the work of Nabonidus may be viewed as haphazard and limited. But there is no question that this king was engaged in exploration of the past, and – unless an earlier example is found – we can regard him as the veritable "father" of archaeology. Although Nabonidus is not mentioned directly in the Bible, his son and co-ruler Belshazzar is mentioned numerous times in the book of Daniel.

In our modern age, the exploration of the past has progressed far from the simple digging and looking of Nabonidus' time. Over the last two centuries archaeology developed as a science that carefully examines and records every aspect of an ancient site, and the emphasis has changed from the artifacts that are found to the meaningful information the artifacts or other sources of data can give us.

A simple definition of modern archaeology might be that it is "the scientific study of the material remains of the past." But archaeology does not study the remains of the past for their own sake, rather to see what they can show us about the people who made, used, or were affected by them. In the case of biblical archaeology, the recovered data is also used to shed light on what the Bible says on specific subjects. A wide array of tools and techniques is used to fulfill these goals.

Bringing the Past to Light

When many people think of archaeology they think of excavation – more often than not, Indiana Jones-like characters digging for priceless artifacts in sand-covered temples or tombs. But in reality, excavation is only one part of the archaeological process. It is often a vital part, but today it is sometimes bypassed and almost always augmented by other archaeological methods of non-intrusive remote sensing. These include the use of modern high-tech tools such as satellite imagery, ground penetrating radar, lidar, and even the use of cosmic particle penetration to "see through" stone structures.

Where physical excavation is involved, it is done with painstaking mapping of the site and documentation of every aspect of how the excavation was performed. It also involves just as painstaking a recording of what was found – including artifacts (portable objects made or modified by humans – such as tools, pottery, and jewelry), features (non-portable modifications to the site itself – such as pits, walls, tombs, and monuments), ecofacts (organic remains – such as animal bones, pollen, or charcoal), and strata (the various human or naturally caused layers discernible within the earth). Ideally, the combined data from the excavation can provide a complete reconstruction of the site and everything in it. Complex archaeological computer programs are often used to combine the recovered data and make just such a reconstruction.

All this fieldwork is followed by careful lab analysis of what was found, including chemical and physical studies of artifacts and ecofacts and their dating through use of techniques such as dendrochronology (tree ring dating), geomagnetic dating, and carbon-14 dating, etc. The final step is interpretation in which the significance of the recovered data is carefully assessed and conclusions drawn. Today this may even include the use of artificial intelligence to search for connections in the data, but it is human thinking that completes the process and forms our understanding of what has been found. Usually, these conclusions are published

and reviewed by other scholars until a consensus is found regarding the best interpretation of the evidence, and the research then becomes part of our ongoing reconstruction of past cultures and civilizations.

In biblical archaeology, the archaeologist might be said to figuratively play a small part in fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah: "They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations" (Isaiah 61:4). In the following pages we will look at how archaeologists have found, examined, analyzed, and interpreted artifacts and sites relevant to the Bible, and exactly what their findings can teach us.

Some of that information has come through the analysis of artifacts found a century or more ago, and that now reside in great museums. Other information has come through the recent or ongoing excavation of sites ranging from hill-like ancient 'tells'[1] to areas of archaeological interest found in the course of modern construction work. Yet other evidence is coming to light through the re-excavation of sites studied by earlier archaeologists who did not have some of the tools or methods we have today. The overall picture is like that of a giant jigsaw puzzle that is being slowly pieced together by many people over time. The picture being formed is the historical past that underlies the Bible, and this book shows what the picture looks like so far.

1. The spelling "Tel" (Tel Aviv, etc.) reflects Hebrew place names, while the spelling "Tell" (Tell Qasile, etc.) is used for Arabic place names. Both spellings are found in this book.

PART ONE

1. Origins

The introduction to this book stressed that it is not possible for archaeology to "prove" many of the events in the Bible because a great many of those events would have left no direct archaeological evidence that we can find and examine. This is especially true of the earliest chapters of Genesis. What the Bible says regarding creation, the origin of human life, the great flood, and other early events certainly lies beyond the realm of archaeological science – but this does not mean that archaeology cannot shed indirect light on what the Bible says about some of these things.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, archaeologists excavating the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations of the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, in what is modern day Iraq, began to find libraries of clay tablets inscribed with the cuneiform writing of these early civilizations. When some of these texts were translated, they were found to be stories that were similar to – but much older than – biblical narratives such as those of the creation and flood.

Creation Stories

There is no single story in Mesopotamian literature that exactly matches the Hebrew creation account of Genesis 1–2, but the similarities that exist between a number of Sumerian and Babylonian stories and that of the Bible cannot be ignored. From the third millennium BC, several fragmentary Sumerian tablets contain references to a time when only the earth and heavens existed. All was dark and there existed

neither sunlight nor moonlight. Water was in the ground, but there was no vegetation yet.

In one early Sumerian story,[1] "Enki and Ninmah," the gods become tired from everything they had to do and complain to the goddess Namma, the primeval sea, who persuades her son Enki, the god of wisdom, to create a substitute to free the gods from their labor. Enki instructs Namma to take some clay which she apparently places in her womb, eventually giving birth to the first humans. Interestingly, in this story and in the slightly later (eighteenth century BC) Mesopotamian story of Atrahasis, as well as in Genesis 1-2, the creation of humans is told in two versions – first a general version, followed by a more specifically detailed retelling of the story. Other Sumerian stories show similar general parallels.

Later Babylonian literature makes more continuous points of contact with the Hebrew creation account. While Genesis outlines the creation story in six days, each with different aspects of the world being created, the Babylonian creation account *Enuma Elish* (possibly fourteenth century BC) tells of the first six generations of gods who are created one after the other – with each god being associated with some aspect of the cosmos. As the account progresses, we see clear parallels at each point:

Enuma Elish Creation Account
First generation Tiamat – primeval waters
Third generation Kishar – earth
Fourth generation Anu – sky
Fifth generation Enki – waters
Sixth generation Marduk – creates man
[Man created so the gods can rest]

Hebrew Creation Account
First day – primeval waters
Third day – earth
Fourth day – lights in sky
Fifth day – sea creatures
Sixth day – animals, humans
Seventh day – God rests

Many other Mesopotamian stories, while quite different from anything in the Bible, still include some of the same details found in the Bible's creation narrative. In one Sumerian story, the god Enki ate eight plants created by the goddess Ninhursag, so she cursed him and parts of his body became diseased. When he became direly ill, the other gods persuaded Ninhursag to help him, and so she relented and created healing goddesses to heal the stricken parts of his body. The goddess who healed Enki's rib was Ninti, whose name means "lady of the rib" or "lady of life" – evoking the story of Eve (Hebrew *Ḥawwāh*) whose name means "life" and who was created from the rib of Adam, as well as the role of the forbidden plant in the biblical Eden. The story of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh contains this kind of vaguely biblical-similar narrative. Enkidu is created in the *Edin* (the Sumerian word for wilderness) and at first lives in harmony with the animals. He is eventually seduced by a female temple servant and after this sexual-based "fall" he is rejected by the wild things and must leave the *Edin*.

The famed Gilgamesh Epic also contains an episode in which Gilgamesh begs Utnapishtim – the Noah of the Mesopotamian story (see below) to tell him the secret of eternal life. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh there is a plant called How-the-Old-Man-Becomes-a-Young-Man-Again. Gilgamesh

obtains a sprig of this plant and begins the journey back to his home. But on the way, while he is resting, a snake seizes the plant, depriving Gilgamesh of the plant of immortality. Although the framework of this story is quite different from that of the "tree of life" in Genesis, the similarities of theme are obvious.

So, while archaeology could never find evidence to substantiate the literal nature of the biblical stories relating to creation, it has provided us a great deal of background material that helps us better see those stories in terms of how they were understood in the ancient world. We will return to this fact below, but the study of the past can shed light on the first chapters of Genesis in other ways. When it describes the garden of Eden, Genesis tells us that the area was surrounded by four rivers – the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Pishon, and the Gihon (Genesis 2:10–13). The Tigris and Euphrates rivers that bound Mesopotamia on two sides are known today, of course, but nothing is known of the other two rivers. This has led skeptics to claim that the "non-existence" of the rivers Pishon and Gihon proves that Eden was just a symbolic area rather than being set in an actual location.

But in 1994, the American Space Agency, NASA, utilized the space shuttle Endeavor to take high-quality ground-penetrating radar images of parts of the Earth's surface to learn how the environment was changing, particularly in areas historically affected by climate change. Study of these images revealed the path of an extinct river beneath the desert sand that crossed northern Arabia from west to east and flowed into Mesopotamia where it apparently connected with the Euphrates River or the Persian Gulf. Subsequent studies indicate this now extinct river dried up and ceased to flow sometime between 3500 and 2000 BC with the development

of more arid conditions. Some scholars have suggested that this river is in fact the Pishon River mentioned in Genesis 2 – meaning that Genesis may well preserve the ancient memory of a river that had vanished long before the writing of Genesis.

The Flood Story

The biblical story of the great flood said to have destroyed humanity apart from Noah and his family (Genesis 6–8) has unfortunately attracted a great deal of pseudo-archaeology. Many explorers and self-styled archaeologists have claimed to have found the remains of Noah's ark (which the Bible says came to rest in the area of Mount Ararat – Genesis 8:11) on the mountain called Ararat in what is today modern Turkey. But not a single one of these claims has ever been substantiated. One such story that attracted a great deal of attention regards a piece of ancient wood that was brought back from Ararat in 2010 by a Chinese-Turkish team of explorers who claimed to have found a wooden structure they believed to be the Ark. However, three out of four samples of this wood that were tested with Carbon-14 analysis returned dates ranging from around 610 BC to AD 1950. The various individuals and teams that have claimed to have found the ark on Ararat have done so in different areas of the mountain, and the situation is further complicated by the fact that the Bible does not actually say the ark rested "on Ararat," but "on the mountains of Ararat" (Genesis 8:4) meaning on a range in that area.

Actually, the biblical description of the flood is open to different interpretations, because the Hebrew words in the story that are translated as "whole earth" or "all the earth" are *kol erets* which mean the whole "earth," "land," "country," or "ground;" and similar explanations exist for other verses in the

Old and New Testaments regarding the flood. In any event, although no evidence has been found for a single world-wide flood (flood deposits have been found in many areas, but these are all localized and date to different times), archaeology has illuminated the biblical story through other ancient parallels.

Three ancient Mesopotamian stories in particular make reference to a great flood, the epics of Ziusudra (Sumerian), Atrahasis (Akkadian), and Gilgamesh (Babylonian). In the first, Ziusudra hears the gods' decision to destroy humanity and constructs a vessel which delivers him from the flood brought on by the gods. Stories about Ziusudra are known to date from at least the middle of the third millennium BC. In the Atrahasis epic, the gods become upset that humans are making too much noise. As a result, they take various measures to destroy humans, the last of which is to bring a great flood upon the Earth. The only person to survive is Atrahasis, who takes his family into a ship, closes the door behind them, and remains there until the flood subsides and the birds he sends out do not return.

The clearest parallels with the biblical account appear in the epic of Gilgamesh, in which, at the end of his quest for immortality, the hero meets a couple who survived the flood. The man, Utnapishtim, tells a story of the flood similar to that of Atrahasis, but with a number of interesting parallels to the biblical account. Utnapishtim was warned by the god Enki and told to prepare a ship, coated in bitumen, into which he takes different kinds of animal. The flood comes from heavy rain and because the 'windows of heaven' are opened. Eventually the ship comes to rest on top of a mountain and at this point Utnapishtim sends out a dove, a swallow and a raven. These details show obvious similarities with the Hebrew flood narrative, and some other details, while not so obvious, show

further parallels. After the flood, Utnapishtim offers sacrifice and the goddess Ishtar comes and lifts her jeweled necklace above her head as a sign of remembrance of the flood. Lifting such a curved, pectoral style jeweled necklace above one's head forms, of course, the shape of the rainbow's arc, and the Akkadian term for rainbow is, in fact, the "jewels of heaven."

Further similarities exist with the Mesopotamian flood-related narratives. In the Sumerian king list, the kings listed as living before the flood are said to have had extremely long lifespans which shorten dramatically after the flood occurs. The parallel with the great ages of the antediluvial patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 5) is obvious, and some scholars have seen even more specific textual and mathematical connections between the various Mesopotamian kings and the ages of the Bible's pre-flood patriarchs. Ancient Egyptian myths and stories also provide some parallels to the creation and flood stories of the Hebrew Bible, though these are often not as similar to the biblical stories as those of Mesopotamia – where the Hebrews originated (Genesis 11:31–12:5).

The Tower of Babel

The final event of major importance that is discussed in the early chapters of Genesis is the dividing of the languages said to have occurred when humans attempted to build a great tower – the Tower of Babel or Babylon (Genesis 11:1–8). An ancient Sumerian epic called *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* similarly tells of a time when all mankind spoke a single language: "The whole universe in unison spoke to [the chief god] Enlil in one tongue" – and the epic then states that speech was changed and contention arose (lines 145–156).

But what of the great tower of Babel/Babylon – can archaeology shed light on such a structure? It is well known that from early times the ancient Mesopotamians constructed high, stepped temple towers called ziggurats that rose up in successive stages, sometimes to considerable heights. Over thirty such ziggurat structures are known, but two of these are of particular interest.

One tower, popularly known as Birs Nimrud, is located in Borsippa on the outskirts of Babylon. It was begun in ancient times, but left unfinished until the powerful Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (the Nebuchadnezzar mentioned in five books of the Old Testament) restored and completed the structure (which he called the "great ziggurat of Babylon" and the "Tongue Tower") to a height of some 250 feet (75 meters) in the period 604-562 BC. There was also a second ziggurat at Babylon, called the Etemen-an-ki ("temple of the foundation of heaven and earth"), located in the southern sector of the city. The building of one of these two towers may well be the origin of the Tower of Babel story recorded in the Bible.

All told, dozens of such parallels have been discovered between the early chapters of Genesis and what archaeologists have recovered of the literature and material culture of the ancient Near East. Although these parallels do not "prove" the events of Genesis, archaeology has certainly shown that the earliest biblical stories seem to reflect widely-known and very ancient traditions and actual places. In the following chapters we will move closer to ever more specific evidence.

1. J. A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Flückiger-Hawker, E. Robson, and G. Zólyomi, trans. *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (Oxford: 1998–2006). The Sumerian stories discussed in this chapter may be found in this source.

2. Wandering Arameans

The patriarchal period recorded in Genesis 12–50 covers the lives of Abram/Abraham and his direct descendants Isaac and Jacob. Although this period represents a considerable number of years according to the biblical narratives, it is a brief moment in historical time and deals with only a handful of people not settled in any given area (Deuteronomy 26:5) – so it cannot be expected to have left direct archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, archaeology can help us better understand this era in many ways.

Clarification and Confirmation

Archaeology can often clear up details that may be unclear in the biblical account of this period. For example, the Bible records that Abraham journeyed to the land of Canaan from the Mesopotamian city of "Ur of the Chaldeans" (Genesis 11:31). This was confusing to early scholars as the only known Mesopotamian city of that name was the famous Sumerian city on the southern Euphrates. It was unknown why this southern city would be referred to as Ur of the Chaldeans since the Chaldeans primarily inhabited northern Mesopotamia. More recently, however, archaeologists have found evidence of a smaller city of Ur in northern Mesopotamia – not far from the region of Haran, where we are told Abraham's father Terah moved his family. So, it is perfectly understandable that this northern Ur would be called "Ur of the Chaldeans" to differentiate it from the more famous Ur over five hundred miles to the south. This also explains why Genesis tells us that Abraham's family was from "Aram" – a region of northern Mesopotamia – (Genesis 24:10; 28:2); why Moses later referred to them as "Wandering Arameans" (Deuteronomy 26:5); and why the Bible speaks of Abram as coming from "beyond the river Euphrates" (Joshua 24:2-3), which was only true of the northern city of Ur.

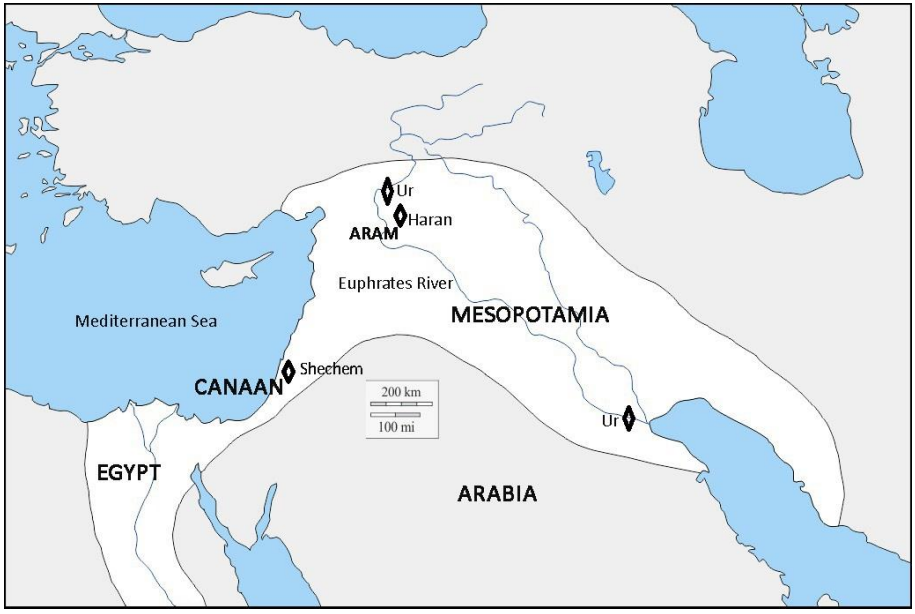

Figure 1: Locations of the two cities of Ur, Haran, and Shechem.

Archaeology can also substantiate details of the biblical account of this era that are sometimes contested. For instance, Genesis records that Abraham had numerous camels (Genesis 24:10). Some have claimed this could not be so, and that camels were not domesticated in Canaan until the late second millennium BC or later – centuries after Abraham lived. But archaeologists have found much evidence to the contrary. In addition to numerous paintings and models of harnessed camels from the early second millennium BC, excavations have revealed camel bones and hair at a number of Mesopotamian sites of Abraham's probable time – and Abraham was, of course, from Mesopotamia. Domesticated camels were probably only owned by the relatively wealthy at that time, which is perfectly in keeping with the biblical portrayal of Abraham as a wealthy man.

Even the names of the Biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are reflected in what archaeologists have found of the personal names of their era. While the specific Hebrew names

mentioned in the Bible have not been found, archaeologists have noted that Mesopotamian Amorite male personal names of the wider society of their time frequently began with the same letters – A, I, and J – and many had similar meanings to the names of the patriarchs. This is significant because the popularity of different name types changed over time and we do not find the name types of the Hebrew patriarchs nearly as often before or after the time in which they lived.

Covenants and Treaties

The social and legal customs of the world of the patriarchs provide amazingly clear parallels with events mentioned in biblical stories. In Genesis 15:9-21, for example, we find the story of God ratifying his covenant with Abram by means of animal sacrifices. In response to Abram's request for a sign that God would fulfill his promise (vs. 8), God instructed the patriarch to take various animals and sacrifice them in a particular manner. After sacrificing the animals, Abram divided them into halves, placing them on the ground in such a way that someone could walk between the halves of the carcasses. The narrative then states: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (Genesis 15: 17-18).

We can understand this strange-seeming story because in some ancient Near Eastern royal treaties in which an agreement was made between two unequal parties – one of higher status and one of lower status – this type of ritual was enacted to seal the agreement. The participants would walk between the halves of sacrificed animals to signify their uniting in the covenant. In this case, the moving flame represented God. Another, much later (c. 590 BC), but clearly parallel example in the time of Zedekiah involves an animal being killed, cut into two pieces, and individuals then passing between the divided pieces (Jeremiah 34:8–22 and note vss. 15, 19). This ancient sacrificial covenant cutting practice

may explain why the Hebrew Bible speaks of "cutting" (Hebrew *karat*) rather than "making" a covenant. Abraham and his descendants also made treaties with some of the tribes and individuals they interacted with (Genesis 14:13; 21:27; 26:26-33; 31:53–54) and some of these covenants may well have been sealed with the same kind of division of sacrificed animals.

Inheritance Responsibilities

The understanding that the early stories of the Bible are set in the social and legal framework of the ancient Near East is one of the great contributions of archaeology to biblical studies. Take, for example, the way in which Abraham's wife encouraged the patriarch to have a child by a slave, Hagar, when Sarah herself could not produce children. Although this episode may seem strange to us today, some ancient Mesopotamian marriage contracts found by archaeologists actually include a prenuptial agreement stating that if a man's wife did not bear children, it was her responsibility to supply a surrogate for her husband – or the husband was free to remarry.

Some of these ancient texts show that if a son was born to the surrogate mother, he had a right to part of the inheritance. The famous Mesopotamian legal code of Hammurabi (c. 1810 – c. 1750 BC) contained laws to protect the rights of such children – legislating that an adopted son could not be discarded if a son was subsequently born to the man's first wife. Laws 170 and 191 state that an adopted child must be given a share of his father's property as an inheritance. But Hammurabi's law also provided a loophole in case the man and his wife agreed that they did not wish to give an inheritance to the son of the secondary wife (should he prove to be disobedient, for example). Law 171 states that in such circumstances both the surrogate wife and her son must be released from slavery if they were enslaved servants; however: "the sons of the maid-servant shall not share with the sons of the wife, but the freedom of the maid and her sons shall be granted."

This background legal situation explains why Genesis tells us that when Sarah saw Abraham's adopted son mocking her own son, she told Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Genesis 21:9–10). Sarah knew that by giving their freedom to Hagar and her son, Abraham would be released from any inheritance responsibility regarding the adopted son. Archaeology thus casts what might seem like vindictiveness on Sarah's part in a very different light and makes the whole story much more understandable to us.

Archaeological understanding of the inheritance issues in the world of the patriarchs helps us to understand even seemingly unrelated events. Genesis 31 tells us that when Abraham's grandson Jacob left the service of his father-in-law, Laban (who had cheated him out of seven years of work), Laban's daughter Rachel – who had become Isaac's wife – stole the *terephim* or household idols of her father. This puzzling detail is clarified by archaeology which has found that household idols of the time represented a family's ancestors and were evidently tied to the family lands. When Rachel took her father's idols, she took, in essence, the deeds to the family property – very likely as compensation for the years of work her husband had been cheated out of.

Limitations of space force us to skip over more material relevant to Isaac and his son Jacob, but all the patriarchal narratives fit well with what archaeologists term the Middle Bronze II (MB II) period – such as the settlement patterns of urbanized cities with small pastoral clans living in between them. Abraham's journey from Ur to Haran to Canaan also follows a general migration pattern of people of that region during the MB II. As the Israeli archaeologist Amihai Mazar commented a number of years ago, the similarities between the culture illustrated in Genesis and that of the MB II are too close to be ignored.[1]

1. Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000-563 B.C.E.* (Yale University Press, 1990): 225.

3. Pharaoh's Land

In looking at the earliest chapters of Genesis, we have primarily considered material from Mesopotamia, but Mesopotamia is not the only part of the Near East that has produced information illuminating the patriarchal period. The sands of Egypt have also provided a wealth of archaeological material relevant to the Bible – especially because in the later part of Genesis and in Exodus the scene shifts to Egypt.

Egyptian Evidence

Egypt provides important evidence in the form of ancient records of Egyptian interactions with Semitic peoples of whom the patriarchs were a part. Egyptian stories such as the "Tale of Sinuhe" describe the lifestyles of the pastoral peoples of ancient Canaan, and Egyptian tomb paintings such as those of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan in Middle Egypt contain scenes depicting Semitic peoples – probably Canaanites – arriving in Egypt in exactly the era of the biblical patriarchs. These scenes illustrate the clothing, hair styles, transportation, and many other aspects of the patriarchal world in remarkable detail.

It is known that large numbers of Semitic people settled in the fertile Egyptian Delta region – where Genesis tells us the Israelites settled in Egypt – in times of drought and famine in Canaan, and specifically in the period in which Genesis indicates Joseph and his family went there (Genesis 43:1–15).

These Semitic peoples reached their greatest numbers in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1700-1500 BC) when Joseph seems to have lived. In fact, so many Semites were present in Egypt at this time that the Delta region was actually controlled by local rulers of Syro-Palestinian origin. In other words, the conditions and political situation revealed by Egyptian archaeology in this period are exactly those described by Genesis and the Joseph story in particular.

We certainly know that some of the Semitic people living in Egypt served in large households just as Joseph did. An Egyptian document (Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446) from the Thirteenth Dynasty (c. 1809–1743 BC) names ninety-five servants from one such household – of whom forty have Semitic names, including several Hebrew names such as that of a woman whose name is a form of Shiphrah, one of the midwives mentioned later in the exodus story (Exodus 1:15).[1]

Critics of the Bible have frequently denied the historicity of the Joseph account on the basis that it would be "unlikely" that a foreign slave could ever rise to great power in Egypt. But we have evidence of a number of Semitic individuals who rose to considerable power there, and many examples of individuals of lowly status being promoted to high levels of authority.

The fact that "no evidence" exists of Joseph as an actual Egyptian high official is actually not significant. In the 1980's the tomb of a previously unknown New Kingdom vizier of Egypt (whose position was directly under that of the Pharaoh – just as Joseph is said to have been) was discovered in Saqqara in Egypt. This powerful vizier, named 'Aper-El (meaning "servant of the god El") was also a Semite and was buried in a non-Egyptian, Semitic manner along with his family members – just as Jacob and Joseph had chosen to be (Genesis 49:29; 50:25).[2]

If the existence of a person as powerful as 'Aper-El could be unknown to modern historians until the recent discovery of his tomb, it is hardly significant that we do not at this time have specific archaeological proof of Joseph – especially as Joseph probably lived in the latter part of the relatively less documented Second Intermediate Period of Egyptian history (c. 1782 – c. 1550 BC).

The Story of Joseph

The story of Joseph – as a Semitic slave who rose to great power – is therefore perfectly plausible in terms of what we know of Egyptian history. Archaeology has also substantiated a number of details of the story itself. Genesis 37:28 tells us that when Joseph

was sold into slavery his brothers received twenty shekels of silver for him. We know from archaeologically found texts that twenty shekels of silver was the average price for a slave in the first half of the second millennium BC – the time of Joseph. In later periods the price was two or three times higher. So the story of Joseph preserves a small but accurate detail of his time – one that could hardly have been guessed.

The titles found in the story of Joseph also match what the study of the past has found. For example, when Joseph worked for Potiphar, he is said to have been "over his house" (Genesis 39:4 KJV; etc.) which reflects an Egyptian title for an estate manager or majordomo that literally means "over the house." An Egyptian papyrus dating to around the time of Joseph and now in the Brooklyn Museum lists the names of such household servants working in various elite homes, and over forty of the names are Semitic – indicating that Joseph's situation was by no means unusual at that time.

Just as clearly authentic are the three titles Joseph told his brothers he held: "father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt" (Genesis 45:8). Archaeologically discovered texts show that these titles were held by some of the highest-ranking Egyptian officials. The title "Father to Pharaoh" is particularly interesting as it was subtly changed by Joseph from the Egyptian "Father of the god" (meaning Pharaoh) – showing a clear knowledge of Egyptian titles as well as the religious sensitivity of Joseph himself. The Semitic vizier 'Aper-El discussed earlier also held the titles "vizier and father of the god."

The names found in the story of Joseph also match name-types the study of the past has found. Those of Joseph's master, Potiphar (Genesis 39:1); Joseph's wife, Asenath (Genesis 41:45); and his father-in-law, Potiphera (Genesis 41:45) – are all understandable as good ancient Egyptian names.

Likewise, the details of Joseph's investiture by Pharaoh (the signet ring, neck-chain, and special linen robe, as well as the official chariot escort that Genesis 41:42–43 tells us were given to Joseph by the Pharaoh) are exactly the insignia of office of the highest-ranking Egyptians.

As for the seven years of famine Joseph predicted and managed, no contemporary Egyptian record of this famine has been found. But there is an Egyptian text from the Hellenistic period which mentions such a seven-year famine in the reign of King Djoser of the Old Kingdom. Even if this story of a seven-year famine is not a garbled account of that in Joseph's time, it illustrates that such severe famines could occur when the Nile River did not provide the flood waters on which Egyptian agriculture depended.

Into Slavery

Archaeology may also help us better understand the background situation in which the Hebrew people became enslaved in Egypt after the death of Joseph. It seems likely that Joseph lived during the time of the Hyksos (c. 1650–1550 BC) in the Second Intermediate Period that occurred after the collapse of Egypt's strong Middle Kingdom era.

The Hyksos were Semitic foreigners who entered Egypt in the absence of a strong centralized government and gained control of northern Egypt. At this time southern Egypt continued to be ruled by a native Egyptian dynasty centered in Thebes, and these Theban kings eventually forced out the Hyksos and reclaimed northern Egypt. It was probably at this time that the "king who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8) came to power and began to persecute and enslave the Hebrews who had settled in northern Egypt.

Although the exact timing of these events cannot be known, archaeology nevertheless can shed light on some of the details of the story. Exodus tells us that the pharaoh who enslaved the Hebrews forced them to make bricks for building projects and to work in agriculture (Exodus 1:13–14). During the New Kingdom period there is archaeological evidence that the Egyptians frequently used enslaved peoples in these activities, and a scene (Figure 1) in the tomb of Rekhmire, vizier of Pharaoh Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC), in Thebes, depicts such a group of foreigners making bricks under the watchful eyes of rod-wielding overseers. The scene provides what the Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen has described as "a vivid visual commentary" on the biblical text.[3]

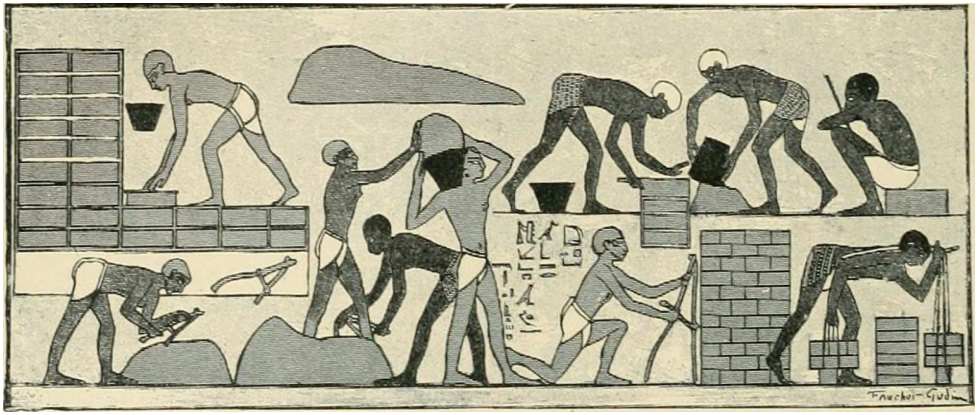

Figure 2: Foreign slaves making bricks. Tomb of Rekhmire, Thebes.

Additionally, a discovered text (Leiden 348) from the thirteenth century BC – the most likely period of the Exodus, as we will see – states that non-Egyptian people called Habiru (a word deriving from the same linguistic root as "Hebrews") who were landless individuals, slaves, laborers, and others, were used to move blocks for building projects in the northern Egyptian city of Pi-Ramesses[3] (modern Qantir) – the city of "Ramesses" mentioned in Exodus 1:11. Although it is clear that not all Habiru were Hebrews, it seems that the Hebrews were part of this larger group.

The opening chapter of Exodus also tells us that the enslaving pharaoh feared because the Hebrew population was burgeoning. He therefore instructed the nation's midwives to kill male babies that were born to Hebrew mothers (Exodus 1:15–16). A detail of this story is that the Egyptian king told the midwives "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool …" and the Hebrew expression translated "delivery stool" (Hebrew *ebenim*) literally means "two stones." This refers to the two bricks on which ancient texts say Egyptian women placed their feet in order to crouch to give birth. One of these birthing bricks – decorated with a scene of a woman with her newborn child and assisted by two midwife figures – was discovered by archaeologists in 2002 at Abydos in Egypt.

Archaeologically confirmed details such as this demonstrate that many of the stories recorded in Genesis and Exodus accurately record the conditions leading up to the exodus - including details which would not have been known in subsequent eras if the stories had been composed in later times, as skeptics often like to claim.

1. Ricardo A. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954): 153.

2. Manfred Bietak, "On the Historicity of the Exodus: What Egyptology Today Can Contribute to Assessing the Biblical Account of the Sojourn in Egypt," in Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider and William H.C. Propp, eds., *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture and Geoscience* (Cham: Springer, 2015).

3. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006): 247.

4. Out of Egypt

Although the Bible's description of Israel's exodus from Egypt shows it to have been an event of phenomenal proportions involving multiple miracles, it is nevertheless an event that is very difficult to establish historically and archaeologically. This is primarily because ancient Egyptian historical records and inscriptions were highly propagandist and did not discuss military defeats and losses – only victories that showed the pharaohs in a positive light. Second, the waterlogged soil of the Egyptian Delta, where the Israelites had settled, is difficult to excavate and does not well preserve papyrus records and other relevant material. Finally, there is also a lack of archaeological evidence because the Hebrews/Israelites were first slaves and then nomadic wanderers – and even very large groups of people moving quickly through a landscape (as the Israelites did) leave little if any archaeologically discernable "signature."

It is important to understand this background because sincere and well-meaning Christians often unknowingly perpetuate unauthenticated claims regarding archaeological "proof" of the exodus. Articles published on online sites and in some printed media have claimed that human skeletons as well as ancient Egyptian weapons and broken chariots have been discovered beneath the waters of the Red Sea, seemingly confirming events of the biblical story of the exodus as found in Exodus 15:4. In reality, these things simply have not been found. But the "announcement" of such evidence of the exodus destruction of Pharaoh's army is a recurring one, with "coral encrusted" chariot wheels, ancient swords and other artifacts routinely said to have been found – but never proven.

In reality, there is no direct evidence of the Israelite exodus, and trained archaeologists understand that none can really be expected. That does not mean that evidence could not come to light at some point, or that there is any reason to doubt the exodus happened.

But while archaeology cannot "prove" the exodus occurred, it can help throw light on some aspects of the story, and we will consider three such areas: the conditions at the time of the exodus, the date of the exodus, and the route of the exodus.

Conditions at the Exodus

It is not clear from the book of Exodus how many pharaohs reigned during the time in which the Israelites were oppressed, and how long this period of oppression lasted, but Exodus makes clear that the Hebrews were singled out for harsh treatment that grew harsher as time progressed. In the last chapter we saw that there is a considerable amount of evidence for Semitic peoples such as the Hebrews in Egypt and we will look at some more evidence here that relates specifically to the harsh conditions Exodus tells us were imposed on the Israelite population.

In addition to the brick-making scene in the tomb of Rehkmire (Chapter 3, Figure 1), archaeology provides us with a considerable amount of textual evidence for the brick-making imposed on the Israelites in Egypt's northeastern Delta, called the Land of Rameses (Genesis 47:11). We begin to find specific records of slaves from the Levant region being put to work in the brick-fields and texts provide many details of this. For example, a scroll dated to the reign of Rameses II and now in the Louvre Museum mentions forty supervisors who were each responsible for a quota of 2000 bricks made by the men under them. And two Egyptian papyri (Anastasi IV and V) mention that there was not enough straw available for brick making.[1] Straw was needed to strengthen the bricks used in large building projects and the need for it illustrates the dismay the Israelites must have felt when the pharaoh stopped supplying it (Exodus 5:18–21).

Excavation of the site of the city of Rameses (Qantir) – the starting point for the exodus (Exodus 12:37), and the main area for which the Israelites made bricks (Exodus 1:11) – has found that the

city was a massive one encompassing numerous square miles, so the difficulty of the Israelites' work was magnified by its extent.

The book of Exodus also affirms that the Israelites were made to do "every kind of field work" (Exodus 1:14) and painted scenes in numerous tombs of the New Kingdom period show foreigners herding cattle and doing various types of heavy field work. Doubtless this agricultural work imposed on the Israelites was also made rigorous as Exodus tells us "in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly" (Exodus 1:14).

The texts and scenes summarized here are of the right time period, and all match the accounts of Israel's forced construction and agricultural work that are found in the book of Exodus perfectly. Although it is indirect evidence, this wealth of data gives plausibility to the biblical tradition regarding the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt and the harsh conditions which they were enduring as the exodus began.

The Date of the Exodus:

The date of the exodus from Egypt is the subject of ongoing debate. Although there are many theories, two principal dates have been suggested: an earlier one in the fifteenth century – in the reign of Pharaoh Thutmose III (1479 to 1425 BC) or Amenhotep II (1427 to 1401 BC) and a later one in the thirteenth century – in the reign of Rameses II (1279-1213 BC). The earlier of these two dates has been especially favored by those who have attempted to work out a chronology of the Bible. However, this can be problematic because years are not given for some individuals, some figures seem to be symbolic or only approximations, there are often overlaps that are difficult if not impossible to separate, and the total number of years for a given period often differs between the Hebrew Masoretic text and the Greek Septuagint translation. While some claim that only the Hebrew text is correct in this regard, the apostle Paul used the Septuagint figures in calculating the 430 years between the time of Abraham and the exodus (Galatians 3:17) – showing that the

situation is not as clear cut as many would presume. While an earlier date for the exodus does seem to fit with some historical facts, it does not agree with others.

On the other hand, the later date seems to better fit the archaeological information we have. For example, Exodus 1:11 names two of the cities that the Israelite slaves labored to build – Pithom and Rameses. While archaeologists feel they have found the remains of these two cities, we cannot expect to find inscriptions in them saying "This city was built by Hebrew slaves"! On the other hand, it is interesting that even in Egyptian texts, a Semitic name for the lakes around Pithom was used instead of an Egyptian name – showing it is likely that a large enough Semitic-speaking population such as the Israelites lived in the region long enough that their name eventually supplanted the original Egyptian name. As for the city called "Rameses" in the Bible, Egyptologists are virtually unanimous in agreeing that it was Pi-Rameses, built in the reign of Rameses II (1279–1213 BC). The late date of the construction of this city is another indication that the exodus could not have occurred at the earlier date suggested by some.

The Route of the Exodus:

The Bible tells us that when the Israelites fled from Egypt, they were able to miraculously cross on dry ground through a large body of water that then returned and drowned the pursuing Egyptian forces. The Hebrew term often translated "Red Sea" in Exodus is *yam suph*. *Yam* means "sea," but *suph* means "reeds" or "rushes," which is why some versions of the Bible call it "the Sea of Reeds" or "Reed Sea" instead of the Red Sea. Not counting the "internet archaeology" idea that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea at the Gulf of Aqaba – which simply does not fit the evidence of travel times that the Bible gives – there are three likely possibilities for the location of this event:

The traditional view is that the Israelites took a southern route and crossed the northwest arm of the Red Sea itself – as

popularized in films such as “The Ten Commandments.” We should remember that “Red Sea” is a modern name, however – the ancient Egyptians actually called this same body of water the “Green Sea.” As a result, some scholars believe the Israelites may have taken a northern route and that the sea they crossed was part of Lake Sirbonis, an inlet of the Mediterranean, though there is little to substantiate this possibility. Other scholars feel that a central route that crossed one of the shallow lakes north of the Red Sea was more likely. This route agrees well with the very limited evidence we have, and with the name “Reed Sea” as ancient Egyptian texts speak of the *pa-tjufy* – the “reed lakes” in this area. Satellite images show the outlines of two additional ancient lakes in the area – directly east of Pi-Rameses – that are possible candidates for the *yam suf* mentioned in the Bible. The largest of these was Lake Ballah, a considerable body of water over twelve miles long and many feet deep in some areas.

Figure 3: Simplified map of the three main proposed routes for the exodus: yellow - northern route, red - central route, blue - southern route, green – common path shared by all routes. Base Image: NASA.

Ultimately, we can only be sure that the Bible states the Israelites crossed a significant body of water on Egypt's eastern border. Exactly which body of water it was remains uncertain, but the book of Exodus reports that instead of traveling on the major road out of Egypt (which was guarded by the recently excavated massive Egyptian fortress of Tjaru) the Israelites initially traveled south-east from Rameses towards Succoth (Exodus 12:37), and then turned back in a northerly direction that probably brought them to the area of the reed lakes. In recent years the archaeologist James Hoffmeier has painstakingly researched the fortress sites which guarded the ancient Egyptian frontier in the Sinai Peninsula and this is his conclusion given the biblical and archaeological clues we have – that the Israelites may well have crossed the reed lake area in the area of Lake Ballah.[2] Future archaeological information gained from this area may well help to even more firmly establish the route of the exodus.

1. Robert and Lorenzon Littman and Jay and Marta Silverstein, "With and without Straw: How Israelite Slaves Made Bricks," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 40, no. 2 (March/April 2014): 63.

2. James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

5. Wilderness Wanderings

After they left Egypt, the Bible tells us that the people of Israel journeyed first to an area God had called them to, and then they wandered for forty years in wilderness regions. We will look at both of these aspects in this chapter.

According to the book of Exodus, God had instructed Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt to the "Mountain of God" so the Hebrews could worship there (Exodus 3:1–12). The biblical account shows that this mountain was in the region where Moses had fled after leaving Egypt earlier – but the exact location has been a matter of ongoing debate.

The Mountain of God

Better known as Mount Sinai or Horeb, it has been suggested that the Mountain of God is to be found in one of at least four different locations:

1. Arabia: Some researchers have suggested that the Mountain of God is one of several mountains in northern Arabia (e.g., Gebel Biggir, Hallat el Badr).

2. North Sinai: Other scholars think that mountains in northern Sinai and what is now Israel that could be the location of Mt. Sinai (e.g., Gebel Helal, Har Karkom).

3. Central Sinai: A few scholars think that a mountain in central Sinai (e.g., Gebel Sin Bishr) is the site of the biblical Sinai.

4. Southern Sinai: A majority of scholars believe that Mt. Sinai is one of several sites in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula (e.g., Gebel Musa, Gebel Katerina).

There are very real problems associated with accepting many of these locations as the biblical Mt. Sinai. For example, Har Karkom in the Israeli Negev has been suggested partly because it has ancient petroglyphs such as a group of ten squares said to reflect the Ten Commandments, and a group of twelve standing stones said to perhaps represent the twelve tribes. But these features do not prove anything and archaeological exploration has found that the site was empty from the beginning of Middle Bronze II (c. 1750 BC) to Iron Age I (c. 1200 BC) – the period in which the exodus seems to have occurred.

Most persuasive of the different possibilities are the sites of the southern Sinai – in the area around the traditional site of Mount Sinai. If we take the data given in the biblical narratives at face value, using the numbers of days the Israelites are said to have travelled (using an average of around twenty miles per day) between leaving Egypt and arriving at Sinai (Exodus 15–19; Numbers 33), and the number of days we are told they travelled from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea (Deuteronomy 1:2), the only region that meets the distance specifications is south Sinai. This area was certainly the one that early Christian tradition associated with Moses and the giving of the Ten Commandments, and many early Christian chapels, monasteries, and other religious buildings were erected on and around Gebel Musa (Mount Moses) and Gebel Katerina (Mount [St.] Catherine) as the area believed to be where the Israelites encamped and where God revealed the Law to Moses.

But the exact location of Mount Sinai remains shrouded. Even the later Israelites apparently did not know the location of the Mountain of God – as we see by the fact that it never became a place of Israelite pilgrimage, as it doubtless would have done if its location had been known.

Commandments and Covenants

But if archaeology has been unable to find evidence to positively identify the Mountain of God, it has certainly been able to

illuminate the covenant and Commandments the Bible says were given there.

We saw in Chapter 2 how the covenants Abraham made were influenced by the legal forms of the time. A similar social-legal background seems to lie behind the form in which the Mosaic Covenant (and the Ten Commandments within it) was given to Israel – which parallels archaeologically discovered covenants made by other nations of the biblical world.[1] These ancient Near Eastern covenants changed somewhat through time, but in the period in which Moses lived they included six essential aspects which may all be seen in the following examples from a Hittite document (the Treaty of Muwatallis II with Alaksandus of Wilusa, c. 1280 BC) and from the reaffirmation of the Mosaic covenant in the Bible's book of Deuteronomy:

1. *Introduction of the Covenant-Maker* –
"These are the words of Muwatallis … King of the land of Hatti" (§ 1, I. B 1–2).
"These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave" (Deuteronomy 4:45).

2. *Historical Prologue* –
"When, in former times my grandfather attacked the land of Wilusa, he conquered [it]" (§ 2, I. B 2–8).
"When they came out of Egypt … They took possession of … the land" (Deuteronomy 4:45, 47).

3. *Stipulations* –
"You … shall protect the [king] as a friend!" (§ 6, I. A 65–7).
"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

4. *Publication of the Covenant* –
"let someone read this tablet which I have made for you three times each year" (§ 19, III. 73–4).

"you shall read this law before them in their hearing" (Deuteronomy 31:11).

5. *Witnesses* –
"The Sun god of heaven … the Sun goddess … the Weather-god" (§ 20, IV. 1–30).
"This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you " (Deuteronomy 30:19).

6. *Blessings and Curses* –
"If you … break the words of this document … then may these oaths destroy you and … your seed from the face of the earth. But if you keep these words, then may the thousand gods … keep you" (§ 21, IV. 31–46).
"If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands … All these blessings will come on you… if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands … all these curses will come on you" (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 15).

These parallels are not just interesting similarities – they help us understand many of the things said about the covenant in the Old Testament and help us recognize the significance of the language used in its description. Other language used in the Mosaic covenant is based on ancient contracts of a more limited type – for example, in the marriage contracts of some of the cultures of the biblical period, the groom stated, "She is my wife, and I am her husband;" and in adoption contracts the father might announce "I will be his father… he shall be my son." These were not just affirmations of the obvious, but key statements sealing the covenant or contract of relationship – and are virtually identical in form to the words we find God speaking to Israel "I … will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; etc.) in "marrying" or adopting Israel (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 8:5; 14:1).

There are many other details of the Mosaic covenant that mesh with the form of other covenants of the time, but the similarities we have looked at here clearly show how archaeology has demonstrated the covenant was given to ancient Israel in the accepted legal form of that era.

Desert Wanderings and Tabernacle

After their stay at the Mountain of God, the Bible tells us that the Israelites wandered throughout the Sinai and Transjordan areas. As is the case with the route of the exodus our of Egypt, for well over a century scholars have tried to determine the route the Israelites took in the wilderness and there is still much disagreement. In fact, tracing the desert wanderings is even more difficult than tracing the initial journey out of Egypt because we have fewer known geographical markers to help us. In fact, a fifteen-year archaeological survey of the Sinai Peninsula conducted by Israeli archaeologists found no ancient encampments that could be attributed to the period of the biblical Exodus and although "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" we must admit that presently we simply do not have evidence for this stage in Israel's journeying.

But archaeology can inform us regarding the details of the tabernacle sanctuary that the Bible tells us was constructed during this time in the wilderness. Rather than being a place of communal worship like modern religious buildings, the tabernacle functioned like the temples of the world at that time – as an enclosed, private sanctuary for the presence of God and as an ongoing expression of Israel's covenant responsibility to him. The temporary nature of the tabernacle was not only the result of the Israelites living in the wilderness, but was also an aspect of the ancient concept of the dwellings of the gods. For example, in ancient Canaanite texts the dwelling place of the chief Ugaritic god is frequently said to be a tent, and the term used for his dwelling was *mashkan* which is almost identical to the Hebrew word for the tabernacle: *mishkan*.

The deities of several Near Eastern societies had such portable tent-shrines or tabernacles.

The tripartite format of the Hebrew tabernacle – of outer courtyard, "holy place," and inner "most holy place" or "holy of holies" – followed the standard form of Egyptian temples – with which the Israelites were obviously familiar. In both cases, each of the three areas was progressively more restricted, and the innermost area was accessible to the high priest only. In both cases the outer area was open to the sky and the inner areas become progressively more private and darkened. Both Egyptian temples and the tabernacle were designed with an east-west (sunrise to sunset) orientation that stressed the continuous and ongoing nature of the daily sacrifices and the maintaining of relationship with the gods or God.

Many items of the furniture of the tabernacle also reflect those of Egyptian temples, from the altar of burnt offerings (of an Egyptian pattern) and the laver (like the purification pool in many Egyptian temples), to the furniture of the innermost shrine. In Egypt, this is where the shrine was located in which the god or goddess lived; and in the case of the tabernacle, the innermost portable shrine – the ark of the covenant – also directly signified God's presence with Israel. In Egypt, winged deities guarded shrines in the same manner that the cherubim guarded Israel's ark.

There are many other similarities between Israel's tabernacle and the actual temples and mythological homes of the gods of surrounding nations at that time. These parallels show that although God was revealing himself to Israel as being completely different from the gods of that world, he also provided a means for Israel to worship him in ways that were familiar to them.

Moving from the Shadows of History into the Light

If the desert wanderings of the Israelites are especially difficult to ascertain, and the whole biblical period between the time of creation and the entrance of Israel into the Promised Land is

shrouded in uncertainty from an archaeological perspective, that changes dramatically in the period we will look at next, in Part 2 of this book. Once we reach the Iron Age – the time when Israel became a settled people and a political entity, the number of biblical places, events, objects, and even people that can be archaeologically attested is nothing short of amazing.

1. René Lopez, "Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 9 (Fall, 2003): 97–102.

PART TWO

6. The Promised Land

The Bible states that after approximately forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel finally entered the land their ancestors had been promised. If the early date for the exodus is accepted (see chapter 4), this would have been around 1400 BC; if the later date of the exodus is correct, it would have occurred around 1240 BC. The fact that Egypt controlled Canaan between 1500–1250 BC makes the later date for Israel's takeover of the land more probable. Once Egyptian control of Canaan loosened and the Egyptian garrisons there were abandoned, the Israelites did not have to fight Egyptian forces in Canaan – as the Bible indicates.

Looking for Destruction

But how exactly did the Israelites take over the Promised Land? Archaeology indicates that the conquest was not accomplished through a widespread violent takeover as many people presume when reading the Bible. There is no sudden destruction level in all the Canaanite cities dating to this period (or any other period, for that matter). But when we read the Bible closely, we find that the book of Joshua speaks of some cities that are said to have been 'attacked,' or 'taken,' and a very few that are said to have been actually destroyed.

In fact, only three cities are said to have been demolished and burnt with fire: Jericho (Joshua 6:24), Ai (Joshua 8:19–21), and Hazor (Joshua 11:11). Among the northern cities of Canaan, the book of Joshua explicitly states "Israel did not burn any of the cities built on their mounds—except Hazor, which Joshua burned" (Joshua 11:13). Does archaeology confirm destruction at these three sites – Jericho, Ai, and Hazor – in the period in which the conquest most likely occurred?

Unfortunately, the site of the ancient city of Jericho has been badly weathered and disturbed over time. Although there is clear evidence of destruction there, dating the destruction precisely has

proven to be very difficult, and there is no clear consensus on this matter. Ai is also problematic in that there is some uncertainty as to which ancient site is to be identified with the city of Ai.

Of the three cities said to have been destroyed by Israel, the evidence at Hazor is clearest, though not without some difficulties. We are certain that the site of Tell el-Kedakh in northern Israel is the site of ancient Hazor, because it is named in an inscribed tablet found at the site itself. It is also the largest Canaanite city ever found – matching the biblical description (Joshua 11:10). Several destruction layers have been found at Hazor, but there is no evidence of change of population or culture after these events – except for a major destruction which occurred at the end of the Late Bronze Age when the city came to a violent end sometime around 1200 BC – the most likely time of the Israelite's arrival. The city was burned then (Joshua 11:11) and the excavated palace shows signs of a great fire that turned its mud-brick walls orange and cracked their stone-block facings from the intense heat. Unlike what occurred after the earlier destructions, the site was then not rebuilt for several hundred years.

Importantly, cultic objects (religious statues, etc.) found in the burned level at Hazor had been deliberately destroyed. This is most unusual as conquering forces usually took statues of gods and other religious items away with them – both to gain their believed power for themselves, and to deprive their enemies of the same power. Destruction of gods is usually unheard of, but would be expected if this had been accomplished by the invading Israelites (Deuteronomy 7:5). Further, some of the statues discovered had been deliberately decapitated, and in one case, the hands of the statue had been severed. The only known parallel to this is found in the Bible where the head and hands of a pagan idol in its temple are said to have been broken off (1 Samuel 5:4).

In addition to the fact that the biblical record actually only describes a very few cities being destroyed by the Israelites, we should also remember that the Bible indicates the conquest was not accomplished quickly, but that Canaanite cities were subdued over a period of time (Joshua 10–11; etc.). Joshua 13:1 tells us that even when Joshua was old there were still many areas of Canaan that

remained to be subdued. Some areas – such as Jerusalem (Joshua 15:63), Gezer (Joshua 16:10), and Megiddo (Joshua 17:11–12) – were not taken till much later, and the land was not completely controlled till the time of David. We are not without evidence of the Israelites in the areas they did successfully take over, as we will soon see, but first we will address the question of whether the Israelites genocidally destroyed the Canaanites.

Genocide?

Many people today may read the book of Joshua and fear that what it describes is genocide committed against the Canaanites by the Israelites. But this is actually highly unlikely. First, we should notice that far more scriptures speak of driving the Canaanites out of the land than those that mention "destroying" them (Joshua 13:6; etc.) In some cases, we are told that God would drive the Canaanites out using methods similar to the plagues he placed on Egypt (Exodus 23:27-28; etc.).

But we should remember that the language sometimes used in these accounts – of the destruction of "everything that breathed," or "men and women old and young," etc. – is typical of ancient Near Eastern victory announcements, although fighting men, not civilians, were the individuals actually involved. Even today, if we tell friends that our favorite sports team recently "annihilated" or "destroyed" another team, everyone understands that we mean they won decisively – that annihilation is hyperbole for victory.

The Bible indicates this to be the case regarding the Israelite taking of Canaan. After telling Israel to "drive out" and "destroy" the Canaanites, Moses commanded the Israelites not to marry them or worship with them (Deuteronomy 7:1-3), which would have been impossible if they were to be literally destroyed. In Joshua, after battles reporting there were no enemy survivors, we are told the enemy was still there (compare Joshua 10:1 with 15:8; etc.). And we are specifically told that many Canaanites remained in the land (Joshua 16:10; 17:12-13; etc.), showing that much of the language of destruction is indeed metaphorical rather than literal and was originally viewed that way.

Archaeology supports this understanding. As we have seen in this chapter, most of the archaeological evidence recovered does not indicate widespread destruction in the eras when the entry into the land might have occurred, and in the next chapter we will see evidence of the Israelites coexisting with the Canaanites. In fact, rather than any evidence of a "rolling Israelite destruction" it has taken archaeologists many years to find evidence of Israel's arrival in Canaan!

Where Are the Israelites?

It is often presumed that once the Israelites entered the land, they took over the Canaanite cities and rebuilt or settled in them, but clear evidence of an incoming culture has not been found in many of these cities. Actually, despite much excavation, until recently virtually no evidence of a "new" culture coming into the area and settling – as the Bible says the Hebrews did – had been discovered from either the earlier or later periods favored for the exodus.

But that situation has changed over the last few decades. A network of some three hundred previously unknown hilltop sites has been gradually brought to light by archaeological surveys conducted in the central hill country of Israel. These simple unfortified sites date to the period of the later date for Israelite entry into Canaan – about 1200 BC – and are the kind of settlements one would expect of such an influx of people. Scores of these agricultural villages were suddenly built on previously uninhabited hilltop land, and the "four-roomed" or pillared houses often built in circular or oval groups found in these sites are different from those found in earlier periods – but are associated with the later Israelites. Importantly, these hilltop villages utilized technologies to allow the newcomers to live in the rugged uplands of central Canaan – water cisterns dug into the earth to collect the meager rainfall, and – more uniquely – terraced platforms that allowed agriculture on the steep hill slopes.

The Bible confirms that when the Israelites entered Canaan, they settled in the hill country. Joshua 17:16 says as much, and "Their God is a God of the hill country," said a king of neighboring Aram (1

Kings 20:23). The archaeological facts regarding the hilltop sites fit the biblical record so well most archaeologists now believe that the "newcomers" who settled in Israel's central hill country around 1200 BC were, indeed, the Israelites. If that is the case, then the later date of the exodus from Egypt – which would have occurred some forty years earlier according to the Bible, in about 1240 BC – is all but confirmed.

Archaeology may have found the Israelites, but – as is so often the case – it also raises new questions as it helps answer old ones. For example, Joshua 8:30–31 tells us that after entering the Promised Land: "Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the Israelites." The Israeli archaeologist Adam Zertal discovered a site with kosher animal bones on Mount Ebal from the twelfth century BC which he believes is a sanctuary with an altar. Other scholars have debated this conclusion, but many archaeologists agree that the site was an Israelite one of a cultic nature.

Equally interesting are a number of strange stone structures also found by Zertal on Mt. Ebal and at a number of other sites in Israel. These sites are stone enclosures built in the shape of a giant footprint with two unequally sized parts that appear to represent the heel and the front of the foot outline. All are quite large, and some cover several acres. Little pottery was found to be associated with many of these structures, but what there was dated to the Iron I (late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries BC – the earliest Israelite period). The scarcity of pottery, along with a complete lack of signs of habitation inside the enclosures, suggests that these sites were not designed or used as dwelling places, and they are too large and well-built to have been animal pens. Could they have been areas utilized in ritual gatherings?

Interestingly, the Hebrew word *gilgal* means a "circle of stones," and the Bible designates a number of different locations as "Gilgal." Most of these places appear to have had a cultic function – one Gilgal was the site of the circumcision of the generation born during the wilderness wanderings (Joshua 5:2–11), and another Gilgal was located in the area of Mt. Ebal where the Israelites renewed their covenant with God (Deuteronomy 11:30). Do the footprint sites

represent such early Israelite gathering places? A number of scholars believe they do.

Archaeological finds such as those discussed above offer tantalizing glimpses into the earliest history of Israel. We may not always fully understand the evidence, but that it is evidence of the beginnings of Israel in Canaan is increasingly clear.

Written in Stone

Ironically, the first incontrovertible proof that the Israelites had arrived and were dwelling in the Promised Land comes from Israel's old oppressor – Egypt. A huge stone monument known as the Merneptah Stele is an inscription made by Pharaoh Merneptah – son of Ramesses II – who reigned from 1213 to 1203 BC. The stele, which was discovered by Sir William Flinders Petrie at Thebes in 1896, is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and gives a list of cities conquered or subdued in the military campaigns of Merneptah.

This famous inscription specifically refers to "Israel," saying: "Israel is laid waste—its people is no more." There is no doubt that this was baseless bragging on the part of the pharaoh – use of such hyperbole saying that the king's enemies were totally destroyed was commonplace in the ancient world and we have many examples of it regarding situations where we have proof the enemies were not wiped out at all.

There is no doubt that the inscription is talking about Israel: the text is perfectly preserved and lists Israel along with three cities in the area of Canaan – Ashkelon, Gezer and Yeno'am. Significantly, the Egyptian determinative (a classifier showing what kind of thing the word represented) for "city" is attached to each of these three place names, but the determinative attached to "Israel" is the one for "people" – showing that Israel was now in Canaan, but had not yet established its own city-sized settlements in the land.

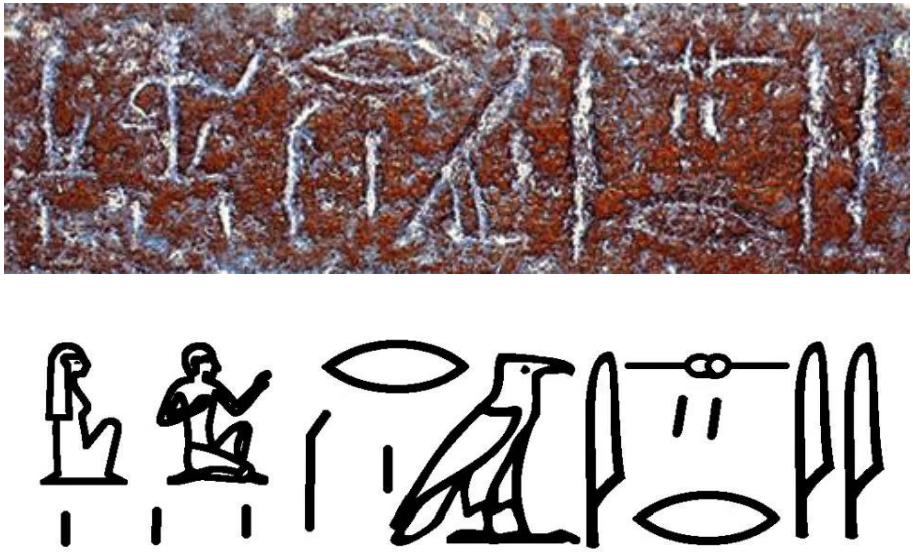

Figure 4: The word Israel as it appears on the Merneptah Stele.

The importance of this evidence cannot be overestimated as it clearly demonstrates the existence of the emerging Israel in the right place at the right time. As archaeologist William Dever has noted:

> The Merneptah Stele is … just what skeptics, distrusting the Hebrew Bible (and archaeology), have always insisted upon as corroborative evidence: an extra biblical text, securely dated, and free of biblical or pro-Israel bias. What more would it take to convince the naysayers?[1]

Indeed, what more could be asked for archaeological confirmation of this aspect of biblical history? With this monument and many of the discoveries considered above, we have reached the point of *direct* physical evidence of things that the Bible records. We will see a great deal more evidence of this kind in the following chapters.

[1] William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2006): 206.

7. Regional Judges

Despite Pharaoh Merneptah's conventional boast to have destroyed Israel (see Chapter 6), the Israelites who had settled in the hill country of central Canaan were largely protected from the Egyptian chariot-based military machine which could not operate in the steep and rugged terrain. Israel thus survived the Egyptian campaigns conducted in the coastal areas and plains of the Levant, and was further helped by the fact that the period of their entry into Canaan coincided with a period of international upheaval and the migrations and settlement of numerous people groups.

These migrant groups, known collectively as the "Sea Peoples," originated in various parts of the Mediterranean and attacked the Egyptians during the reign of Ramesses III around 1180 BC. When they were repulsed by the Egyptians, many of the Sea Peoples – such as the Philistines we read about in the Bible, and from whom we get the modern name "Palestine" – settled in the coastal areas of Canaan and significantly weakened the Canaanite populations in that area. This situation opened the door for Israel's establishment in the uplands of Canaan, but Israel's problems were not over.

The Bible states that after Israel had settled in Canaan, the Israelites had no national leader like Moses or Joshua, and were led by a series of "judges." These (often regional) leaders emerged during times of crisis – usually after a cycle of Israelite apostacy followed by oppression of enemies and Israel's eventual pleading to God for help. Then a judge would arise and restore Israel's independence until the cycle repeated itself (Judges 2:10–19).

During this Iron I period, approximately 1200–1000 BC, the Israelites continued to expand their hold on the area of Canaan, and we find the unique two-story four-roomed house style that first appears in the hill country settlements (see Chapter 6) becoming a standard housing style in larger villages. Analysis of the social patterns associated with the archaeological remains of these houses

and villages reflects many of the things we read in the book of Judges.[1]

Canaanite Religion

The Bible states that the Israelites coexisted with local Canaanite populations in many cases (Judges 1:21,27–33; 3:5; etc.), and archaeology has found ample evidence of that.[2] This meant that Israel inevitably began to absorb many aspects of Canaanite culture and religion. Hebrew itself is a Canaanite language (Isaiah 19:18) and from its earliest appearance until the Babylonian exile, Hebrew was written in the Canaanite alphabet. But it was in the area of Canaanite religion that Israel encountered problems.

The book of Deuteronomy states that even before they entered the Promised Land, God told the Israelites that they must not participate in the Canaanite's religious activities – rather they must "Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire" (Deuteronomy 7:5). Archaeology provides a window into Israelite acceptance of these and other pagan Canaanite practices.

Altars where sacrifices were made to a deity have been found in many areas of Israel dating to the Iron I period. Many were equipped with projections on the corners, called the "horns" of the altar (Leviticus 4:7; etc.). This design originated among the pagan nations of the Near East and such altars were used by the Canaanites (Judges 2:2), but the design was also utilized by the Israelites.

Standing stone pillars of a religious nature have likewise been found at many sites in Israel. For example, in a Canaanite sanctuary at Hazor, more than thirty such pillars of varying size were found. Often the pillars were erected in pairs leading some scholars to believe they may have represented male and female deities. But despite the biblical prohibition of the use of such sacred stones, they are found in numerous sites known to have been Israelite.

"Asherah poles" were similar religious objects, but made of wood or trees and are known to have represented Asherah (also called Elat or Baalat), the female consort of the Canaanite gods El or Baal. These poles also entered Israelite religion and the Bible records that the judge Gideon destroyed his father's altar to Baal and "cut down the Asherah pole beside it" (Judges 6:25).

Numerous idols have been found in the remains of Canaanite shrines or 'high places' such as those condemned in the Bible (Hosea 5:13; etc.). Some of these idols were anthropomorphic figures of El, Baal, Asherah, or the many other Canaanite deities, and some were zoomorphic figures, especially of bulls. At a hilltop site north of Shechem, archaeologist Amihai Mazar found an apparently Israelite shrine dating to the period of the Judges that contained a cultic standing stone, and a small bronze figure of a bull that is very similar to a bronze bull idol found in a Canaanite context at Hazor. The "golden calf" idol made by the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 32) was clearly not the last such image they made under the influence of their pagan neighbors.

There was another Canaanite religious practice that was singled out in the Bible as being particularly abhorrent – that of infant sacrifice. Leviticus 18 accuses the Canaanites of a number of evil practices, including child sacrifice. Some modern doubters have challenged the likelihood that this practice existed in ancient Canaan and have claimed that there is no actual historical proof for it. Archaeological evidence of child sacrifice by the Canaanites has been found, however. Ancient reliefs carved in the Egyptian temples of Karnak and Luxor, around the time of the pharaoh Ramesses II (the probable period of the exodus) actually show this abominable Canaanite practice. The reliefs depict Egyptian soldiers attacking Canaanite fortified cities of the type described in the books of Joshua and Judges, and the kings of the cities are pictured making fiery offerings to their gods over the dead bodies of children on the city walls (exactly as we find described in 2 Kings 3:27). The offering of such human sacrifices may have only occurred under exceptional circumstances, but the scholarly publication of the

Egyptian scenes concludes that these representations do unquestionably depict Canaanite child sacrifice.[2]

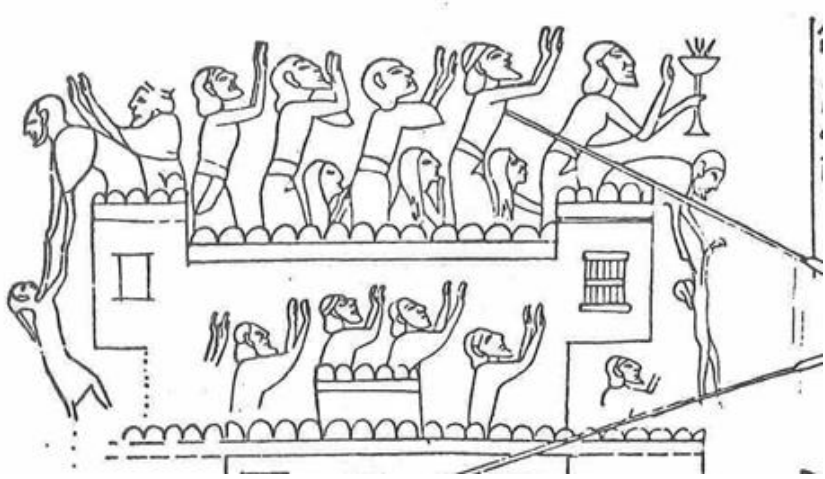

Figure 5: Canaanites sacrificing their children in their besieged city – as recorded in New Kingdom Egyptian reliefs, Karnak temple, Thebes.

Sadly, it is possible that even in this area we may see hints of such practices being adapted by Israelites in the period of the Judges (see, for example, Judges 11:31–40) when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25 ESV).

Confirmation of Biblical People and Places

More positively, archaeology has confirmed a number of details of the biblical account of the period of the Judges. For example, the Bible states that when Jabin, King of Hazor, heard of the victories of Joshua and the Israelites, he assembled a coalition of Canaanite kings to fight against them (Joshua 11:1–11). Jabin and the other kings were defeated, but over a hundred years later, in the period of the Judges, an Israelite army led by Deborah and Barak is said to have defeated a king named Jabin of Hazor (Judges 4:1–24). While skeptics have posited that this repetition shows uncertainty on the

part of the writer of Judges, a text discovered in archaeological excavations at Hazor and dating to around the seventeenth century BC mentions Jabin, King of Hazor. One of the Mari Tablets dating to the eighteenth century BC also names a "Jabin-Adad" as king of Hazor. This archaeological evidence covering several hundred years shows that "Jabin, king of Hazor" was almost certainly a title rather than a personal name – not unlike "Pharaoh, king of Egypt"– and the writer of Judges was not dealing with confused or contradictory sources at all.

More importantly, archaeologists recently discovered a 3100-year-old inscription from the period of the judges which may refer to Gideon, the Israelite warrior-leader famous for defeating the Midianite and Amalekite armies that invaded ancient Israel (Judges 6). The inscription was found in a Judean hill site and dates to 1100 BC – the time of the biblical Gideon. While this inscription may not provide firm proof of Gideon, it is of great importance for a number of reasons. For one thing, before its discovery some had even argued that the alphabet was unknown in the region, that there were no scribes, and that the biblical accounts must therefore have been written much later. This find helps correct that view.

The inscription itself consists of the name Jerubbaal, known in the Bible as the nickname of the judge Gideon (Judges 6:31–32), written on what remains of a pottery jar or jug. The Bible explains that the name Jerubbaal was given to Gideon: "because Gideon broke down Baal's altar, they gave him the name Jerub-Baal" (Judges 6:32). Jerubbaal may also mean "May Baal be great," and while biblical writers often used the word Baal to refer to the pagan Canaanite god Baal, the word could also mean "lord," as in the name of one of David's heroes Baaliah or Bealiah ("Yah is Lord") in 1 Chronicles 12:5 – so that the name Jerubbaal ("May the lord be great") could also refer to Israel's God Yahweh. But outside the Bible the name Jerubbaal is otherwise unknown in archaeological or historical contexts, and even if the new inscription does not refer to the Jerubbaal we know as Gideon, it shows that Jerubbaal was a name in use in exactly the time Gideon is said to have lived.

Another biblical figure of this period on whom excavation has shed light is Sampson. The last judge mentioned in the book of Judges, the strongman Sampson is famed for having slain a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:5–6) and a circular stone seal found in excavations at Beth Shemesh, west of Jerusalem, seems to depict an unarmed long-haired man with a lion. Interestingly, although the seal may or may not represent the biblical Sampson, the seal was dated to the twelfth century BC – the era of Sampson himself.

More important for our understanding of the Bible, Judges states that at the end of his life Samson toppled two pillars in the temple of his Philistine captors, killing them when the building collapsed (Judges 16:23–30). In 1972 the first Philistine temple ever to be found was excavated at Tell Qasile, near Tell Aviv. This temple, dating to the eleventh century BC – the time of the Judges – was comprised of an antechamber and main hall, the roof of which was originally supported by two wooden pillars set on round stone bases and placed quite close together on the hall's center axis. Since 1972, other Philistine temples have been excavated and all had this central two column design that the Bible asserts Samson was able to take advantage of to destroy the temple at Gaza.

Israelite sanctuaries of the period of the Judges have also come into archaeological view. For example, the Bible mentions that a sanctuary was built under the Judges at the site where Joshua had earlier set up a large stone to commemorate the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem (Joshua 24:27). This sanctuary was called the Temple of El-Berith meaning "God of the Covenant" (Judges 9:46), and the book of Judges notes specifically that the temple had a pillar or standing stone.

The location of Shechem has been firmly identified as the site of Tell Balata where excavators have found the ancient temple – in the front of which they discovered a large pillar of stone about 5 feet (1.60 m) high and 5 feet (1.60 m) wide, though originally the stone was possibly over twice as tall. There is little doubt that this sanctuary and the one described in the book of Judges are one and the same.

Such discoveries well illustrate how, as we move forward in the history of Israel, archaeology is able to confirm a growing number of biblical statements and shed light on many more.

1. Lawrence Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel" *Bulletin of the American Society of Overseas Research* 260, 1985: 1–35.

2. Lawrence Stager, "The Song of Deborah—Why Some Tribes Answered the Call and Others Did Not," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 15:01, 1989.

3. Anthony Spalinger, "A Canaanite Ritual Found in Egyptian Reliefs," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 8, 1978: 47-60.

8. A United Kingdom

The internal social problems and external threats Israel experienced (especially the Philistines – 1 Samuel 12:12) during the period of the Judges led to the coronation of Saul of Gibeah as Israel's first king and the establishment of the Israelite monarchy around 1030 BC.

Israel's First King

While the name of Saul has not yet been found outside the Bible, we are told that Saul established the first political capital of Israel in his hometown of Gibeah, and what archaeology tells us regarding that site meshes well with the biblical account. Gibeah has been identified with Tell el-Fûl, not far from Jerusalem. Excavation of this site discovered that it was occupied between about 1200 BC and 1150 BC in the period of the Judges, but was abandoned then – only to be reoccupied around 1025 BC when a fortified structure was built there in the Iron Age IIA period.

This dovetails with what the Bible states: that most of the Benjamite inhabitants of Gibeah were wiped out in a great battle during the time of the Judges (Judges 20), and that Saul rebuilt there during his reign between c. 1030–1000 BC.

A possible indirect reference to Saul also occurs in the famous Qeiyafa Ostracon, found in Israel in 2008. The text of this inscription has been interpreted in different ways, but one distinguished scholar, Émile Puech – the senior epigrapher of the prestigious *École Biblique et Archéologique Française* in Jerusalem – translates one of the lines of the text as "The men and the chiefs/officers have established a king." The text dates to around the time of Saul and, if Puech is correct, refers to Saul's establishment as Israel's first king. In any event, the archaeological evidence of Gibeah strongly suggests the reality of the core biblical narratives regarding this era.

Finding David

With Israel's next king – David – archaeology can offer clearer and more specific evidence. Although David is mentioned over a thousand times in the Bible, lack of external attestation led many skeptics to claim that he probably never existed. But in 1993 and 1994, fragments of an inscribed stela were found in the excavation of Tel Dan in northern Israel. The inscription, which can be securely dated to the ninth century BC, specifically mentions a king of Israel of the "House" or dynasty of David.

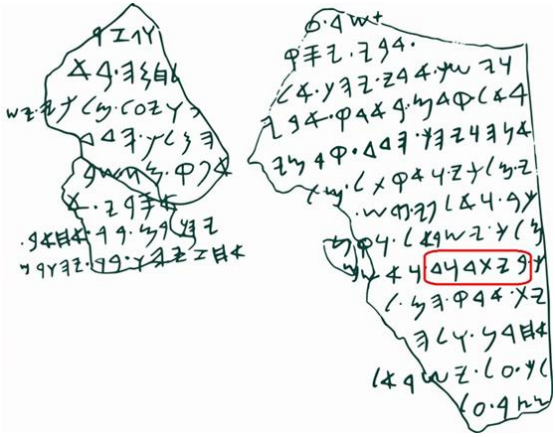

Figure 6: Tel Dan Inscription, ninth century BC. The letters outlined in red by the author read *byt dwd* = "House of David."

This discovery led to a reexamination of the famous Mesha Stela – a contemporaneous Moabite inscription discovered more than a century ago – and the recognition in that artifact of perhaps another reference to the House of David. So archaeology may now provide us with two extra-biblical references to David dating to the ninth century BC – only a generation or two after his reign.

Archaeology is also fleshing out details of David's reign. Perhaps most famously, Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar, in her excavations in Jerusalem, discovered the remains of a large monumental building that she believed was the palace of King David himself.

This conclusion has been disputed by some archaeologists, but it is clear that the structure does seem to be a palatial building that dates to either the Iron Age I or Iron Age IIA – the time of David. But even if the structure dates to Iron Age I – the period just before David's conquest of Jerusalem – David may still have used the structure as his palace or as a fortress.

Pottery evidence shows that the structure was expanded and used in Iron Age IIA, so it is very possible (as suggested by Amihai Mazar and other archaeologists) that the structure was the Jebusite stronghold David captured when he conquered Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:7), and that he then expanded and used the building as his palace or fortress after he took the city (2 Samuel 5:9).

Similarly, at Khirbet Qeiyafa about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem, excavators have recently found evidence that the site may have been one of a number of fortresses erected by King David in the face of the threat from Israel's Philistine enemies. The fact that these sites are all close to Jerusalem, share similar planning features, and were all located on roads leading into the kingdom, suggest they may have all been fortified at this time as part of a centralized defensive plan by the new monarchy.[1]

Finally, some of David's recorded words are illuminated through the finds of archaeology. In David's lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan, for example, David cries "Mountains of Gilboa, May there be no dew nor rain on you, or fields of offerings!" (2 Samuel 1:21 NASB, etc.). As it is usually translated, the latter part of this sentence makes little sense (probably because of a scribal error regarding two similar letters in the Hebrew text), but archaeology shows us that David was almost certainly quoting an exclamation of grief from the widely known Canaanite *Epic of Aqhat* where the hero Danel laments the death of his son "May there be no dew, no rainfall, no welling up of the watery deeps." The words of David's lament make perfect sense when understood with this background. This detail is important because the ancient Canaanite lament would not have been known in much later times when some skeptics claim the accounts of David were written.

Solomon and the Skeptics

The reality of David's son Solomon – as he is described in the Bible – has also long been doubted by skeptics. It is true that we do not yet have direct evidence of him, but archaeology is confirming the existence of great building projects from the time Solomon is said to have lived that very likely were made by the king.

Unfortunately, Solomon's greatest feat of construction – the temple of God – was completely obliterated after the Babylonian destruction of the city when Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. Ironically, the only known surviving evidence of the majestic temple consists of a few tiny objects. For example, a small ivory pomegranate-shaped object inscribed "Belonging to the Tem[ple of Yahwe]h, holy to the priests" was thought to be a modern forgery for some time, though the latest examinations have determined it is most likely authentic. Also of interest, a tiny inscribed *beka* weight (5.5 grams or 0.2 ounces) from Solomon's time was recently found in excavations near the Temple Mount. The *beka* was used to measure the half-shekel temple tax due from each member of the community (Exodus 38:26).

But if next to nothing remains of Solomon's temple, there are substantial remains of his other projects. For example, the Bible states that the king built up and fortified the royal cities of Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer (1 Kings 9:15–16). Many archaeologists of the last century felt they were able to identify features in these sites that were the result of Solomon's building program in the tenth century BC, though later scholars have sometimes questioned the date of these remains and therefore the connection between them and Solomon. However, the most recent excavations have utilized newer techniques, including extensive carbon-14 dating of samples, that have confirmed the dating of some of these structures to the first half of the 10th century BC – the time of Solomon.

At Gezer in the Judean hills, for instance, the city's fortified gate, massive "casemate" walls, and administrative building can now be positively dated to Solomon's era,[2] and fit perfectly with the Bible's

description of that king's building program. In the same way, at the site of Megiddo in northern Israel, excavators have found remains of apparent horse stables, as well as stone mangers, and an exercise corral for the horses, likely constructed by Solomon and rebuilt by later kings of Israel who stationed horse and chariot forces at the site due to its highly strategic location.

Yet overall, archaeological evidence from the time of Solomon would seem to agree with the biblical data – that Solomon relied more on diplomatic relationships such as marriages with allies than military might in the running of his kingdom. Critics have often claimed that Solomon's marriage to a daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh (probably Siamun of the Twenty-First Dynasty –1 Kings 3:1, etc.) would never have happened as the powerful Egyptian kings did not give their daughters to foreign rulers. While this is true for much of Egyptian history, Solomon reigned at a time of Egyptian weakness when the Pharaoh would have been far more likely to ally with a relatively strong neighboring king. Nevertheless, the Egyptian princess is the only individual singled out from all Solomon's many wives (1 Kings 11:3) showing the prestigious nature of that arrangement. 1 Kings 9:16 tells us that the pharaoh captured the city of Gezer from the Philistines and gave it as a marriage gift to his daughter, and archaeological evidence recovered at the site indicates that Gezer was indeed destroyed around the time of Siamun.[3]

1. Yosef Garfinkel, "Early City Planning in the Kingdom of Judah: Khirbet Qeiyafa, Beth Shemesh 4, Tell en-Naṣbeh, Khirbet ed-Dawwara, and Lachish V," *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 4 (2023): 87-107

2. Steven Ortiz and Samuel Wolff. "Solomon's Powerplay: Gezer's Royal Complex Confirmed," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 50.2 (2024): 48–54.

3. Steven Ortiz, "Gezer Destructions: A Case Study of a Border City" in Ben-Yosef, Erez; Jones, Ian (eds.) *Essays on Archaeology in the Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond in Honor of Thomas E. Levy*. Springer (2023): 731, 745.

9. The Kingdom of Israel

According to the Bible, after the death of Solomon the northern ten tribes of Israel split from the southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah. The two kingdoms then continued independently till their final downfalls. Carbon-14 dating of material from various sites suggests that the kingdom of Judah rose in approximately 1000 BC and the northern kingdom of Israel, on the other hand, developed around 900 BC – just as indicated by the Bible.

Multiple kings reigned in each of these kingdoms during the following centuries and a good number of these monarchs have been confirmed archaeologically, including eight kings of the northern kingdom of Israel (Ahab, Hoshea, Jehu, Jeroboam II, Joash/Jehoash, Menahem, Omri and Pekah). The famous Mesha Stele or Moabite Stone discussed in the previous chapter mentions a number of these biblical kings on that single monument, and a fragmentary wall painting from Kuntillet ʻAjrud, which was within the northern kingdom's cultural sphere of influence, depicts a seated but unnamed Israelite king posed in grand near-eastern style. Discovered inscriptions such as this vividly demonstrate that these kings mentioned in the Bible are real figures in history.

Unfortunately, the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles state that with hardly any exceptions the kings of the northern tribes fostered religious apostacy that culminated in Israel's eventual defeat and captivity.

Establishing Apostacy

The Bible tells us that the first king of the northern tribes, Jeroboam, set up two pagan-inspired sanctuaries with golden-calf idols (1 Kings 12:28–29) to rival the worship of Yahweh centered on the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. One of these sanctuaries was constructed at Dan, near Israel's northern border, and one at Bethel, on its southern border, not far from Jerusalem. At the

northern site of Tell el Kadi or Dan, excavations revealed a large Iron II period sacred precinct with temple-like architecture, the remains of a massive four-horned altar, and cultic items. The animal-bone remains found at this site showed ongoing sacrificing and feasting took place there. The sanctuary evidently functioned from the late tenth century BC – the time of Jeroboam – and it is clear that this was the sanctuary described in 1 Kings. The archaeological evidence supports the biblical account of both the location of the Israelite sanctuary and the time periods in which it was used.

Excavations at Beitin, thought to be the site of ancient Bethel, have not discovered a parallel cult area in that city. Although the identity of the site has not been conclusively proven, it has not yet been fully excavated. In any case, it is likely that the southern cult area, which was close to Jerusalem, was affected by the religious reforms of Judah's king Josiah (640–609 BC) when it was likely destroyed (2 Kings 23:4–14), as we will see in the next chapter. Nevertheless, the northern cities of Dothan, Gezer, Kedesh, Megiddo, Shiloh and Shechem have all revealed small local carved-stone altars – most of which are of the same four-horned type as that found at Dan –indicating the widespread nature of the apostate religion.

During Jeroboam's reign, the Egyptian pharaoh Sheshonq I (945–925 BC) – called Shishak in the Bible – attacked Judah and Israel. The attack on Judah is described in 1 Kings 14:25–28, but because of the Judean-focused perspective of 1 Kings it does not mention the pharaoh's invasion of Israel. This is a situation in which archaeology can supplement and clarify the biblical record, because Sheshonq's records of his invasion specifically list not only Judean cities, but also cities such as Megiddo in Israel. Excavation at these sites has found clear destruction levels at Gezer, Shechem, and Taanach, as well as Megiddo, that all date to Sheshonq's time – showing that the Egyptian incursion was widespread.

After Jeroboam, the most significant northern king was Omri, who founded the Omride dynasty c. 885 BC (1 Kings 16:16). Omri is

mentioned in a number of ancient Near Eastern inscriptions, the most famous of these being the Mesha Stele and the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (see below). Even a hundred years after Omri's dynasty had come to an end, the territory of Israel was still referred to as "Omri-land" (*Bit Humria*) in Assyrian inscriptions. Omri is also attested by excavations in Israel. When Omri first became king, the capital of Israel was based at Tirzah, which he attacked. The site – modern Tell el-Far'ah – has been excavated and showed evidence of having been destroyed at this specific time.

Omri established a new capital for the northern tribes at Samaria, which then remained Israel's center of power till its downfall. The king built a palace there that was later expanded by his son Ahab, and Phoenician craftsmen were used to help build this palace just as they had helped Solomon build his palace in Jerusalem. Israel's alliance with Phoenicia also led to the marriage between Ahab and a Phoenician princess – the infamous Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 16:32). Ahab embellished the royal palace (which has been excavated) with beautiful ivory carvings (1 Kings 22:39), many of which have been found.

The immoral actions of Ahab and Jezebel are clearly seen in the story related in 1 Kings 21 which tells how Jezebel had the man Naboth murdered so Ahab could take his vineyard in Jezreel (1 Kings 21:1-2). Excavations conducted at Jezreel in 2013 uncovered the remains of a large winery complex of approximately one hundred and thirty square feet and consisting of a treading floor of thirty-four square feet and two vats, each of about fourteen square feet and more than three feet deep. Comparison with other wineries in the area of known dates and certain clues in the biblical text led the excavators to conclude that this site could indeed be the remains of Naboth's vineyard.[1]

The Beginning of the End

During Ahab's reign, Assyria in northern Mesopotamia became an ever-growing threat. Although the Bible does not mention it, we

know from archaeological evidence that the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) pushed his armies westward toward Israel and Phoenicia in 853 BC. Although the combined forces of the area repelled the Assyrians, it was a temporary victory and it would not be long before they would return. Meanwhile, the Assyrians soon began to demand tribute from Israel. The famous Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III dating to 841 BC that was found in the ancient Assyrian capital of Nimrud, and which is now in the British Museum, states that the Israelite king Jehu presented gold, silver, and precious vessels to Shalmaneser as tribute. The obelisk depicts a man bowing before Shalmaneser, and above the groveling figure the Akkadian inscription states *Ia-ú-a mar Hu-um-ri* – "Jehu of the House of Omri."

Figure 7: Scene from the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III showing a figure bowing before the Assyrian king and the inscription "Jehu of the House of Omri" in Akkadian.

The practice of paying tribute to the Assyrians to keep them away continued for some time and is documented in a number of Assyrian texts. Eventually, however, Israel rebelled against the Assyrians, and in 733 BC the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser attacked

northern Israel and carried thousands of Israelites into captivity in Assyria (2 Kings 15:29). The Assyrian king's records speak of this, and modern archaeological work in northern Israel has detected the drop in population that followed that event. As a side-note, archaeological work in northern Israel has also found widespread evidence of destruction caused by the great earthquake in the reign of Jeroboam II that is mentioned in the book of Amos (Amos 1:1).
Samaria survived the attack of Shalmaneser III, but finally Hoshea (732–722 BC), the last king of Israel, rebelled against the Assyrian monarch Shalmaneser V (727–722 BC) and Israel's doom was sealed. Despite an alliance with Egypt that Hoshea attempted, Shalmaneser V and his successor, Sargon II (721–705 BC), attacked Israel and besieged Samaria for three years until the city finally fell in 721 BC. It was long presumed that Sargon destroyed Samaria at that time, but archaeological work in the city has found no evidence of destruction, and it is now clear that both the Assyrian records and the Bible (2 Kings 17:6) claim only that the city was captured and its inhabitants deported.

So ended the northern kingdom of Israel. Samaria became the seat of the local Assyrian governor, and the Israelite population was deported and settled in other lands – just as the prophets the Bible states were sent to warn them had predicted (2 Kings 17:13).

1. Norma Franklin, Jennie Ebeling, Philippe Guillaume, Deborah Appler, "Have We Found Naboth's Vineyard at Jezreel?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 43 (2017): 49-54.

10. The Kingdom of Judah

After the division of the united Israel into the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the southern kingdom's problems began early. The Bible tells us that there was frequent warring between the two kingdoms, and in the reign of Judah's first king, Rehoboam, the Egyptian pharaoh Sheshonq I (945–925 BC) – or Shishak as he is called in the Bible – attacked Judah. After Sheshonq had captured a number of Judah's fortified cities, he marched on Jerusalem, and 1 Kings 14:25–28 records that he took the treasures of the temple before returning to Egypt.

Interestingly, the inscriptions Sheshonq carved onto temple walls in Egypt to record his victories list the cities he captured in Judah, but not Jerusalem, and it appears that Rehoboam used the temple treasures to buy off the approaching pharaoh. The popular movie *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* notwithstanding, it is extremely unlikely that the ark of the covenant was taken from the temple's holy of holies and probable that it remained there till Jerusalem's eventual destruction.

Alternative Religion

Despite its centralized religion focused on the temple in Jerusalem, the Bible shows that during most of its existence Judah, like Israel, had many "high places" or open-air altar shrines – apparently modelled on Canaanite ones – where the people worshiped. The existence of these high places (Hebrew *bamot*) is the primary measure that the biblical writers use in assessing the performance of a king. Judged by this standard, most of Judah's kings – including even some of the better ones (1 Kings 15:14; etc.) – failed badly.

Despite the biblical prohibition against them (Deuteronomy 12:2–5) there seems to have been centralized acceptance of these high places and other religious sites for most of Judah's history.

Some of the sites may have been utilized in the worship of Israel's God, but many of them clearly were not.

For example, in 2012, Israeli archaeologists uncovered a temple at Tel Moẓa, less than four miles northwest of Jerusalem. The temple complex consisted of a courtyard and a large rectangular building built according to the typical Syrian-style temple plan in which a long hall was divided into two unequal parts. A larger forward chamber was connected to a front portico, with two columns flanking the entrance, and a smaller "holy of holies" located at the back, where the central object of worship – a statue or shrine – was placed: just like the temple in Jerusalem.

The Tel Moza temple was no minor structure and had walls ranging from three to eight feet thick. Interestingly, the rear, most sacred part of the temple was somewhat raised in elevation – as is the case in many Egyptian temples. A number of cultic items such as human and animal figurines were uncovered in the shrine which has been found to have been constructed in the early ninth or possibly late tenth century BC, and to have continued to function throughout the early stages of the Iron II period.

That a temple of such size could function so close to Jerusalem can only indicate ongoing centralized acceptance – or ignoring – of such cult sites.[1] While alternative religion was state-encouraged in the northern kingdom of Israel, it was apparently simply allowed for most of Judah's history – as the Bible indicates. Some of Judah's better kings did make a concerted effort to demolish the high places and shrines of the people. One such king was Hezekiah (715–686 BC) who did much to remove pagan religion from ancient Judah during his reign.

Seals of Governors, Kings, and a Prophet

Some particularly important pieces of archaeological evidence for the Bible date to the period of Hezekiah. Several years ago, a seal impression (used for "signing" or authenticating documents and

other items) was found near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem bearing the title of the governor of the city during the reign of Hezekiah. A seal of King Hezekiah himself was also found in excavations in the same general location. Other seal impressions of Hezekiah are known, but this was the first time one was found in context and undeniably authentic.

The biblical record shows that the great prophet Isaiah was an important supporter and advisor of Hezekiah, and in 2018, archaeologist Eilat Mazar announced that the ongoing excavations in the same area of Jerusalem where the Hezekiah seal was found had unearthed another seal impression which appears to be that of Isaiah himself.

The 2,700-year-old stamped-clay artifact is divided into three bands or "registers," with the top register containing the partial image of a grazing deer – a symbol of blessing and protection used in ancient Judah. The center register contains the words *le Yesha'yah[u]* "[belonging] to Isaiah." The lowest register is somewhat damaged, but appears to contain the first letters of the word *nvy* or "prophet" – giving a reading of "[belonging] to Isaiah the proph[et]."

Figure 8: Clay seal impression inscribed with the name *Yesha'yah[u]* – Isaiah.

The seal was discovered in an undisturbed area of the excavation less than ten feet from where the seal of King Hezekiah was found,

and the physical proximity of the two seals lends weight to the likelihood that the Isaiah seal is that of the prophet himself. As Dr. Mazar pointed out, it would not be the first time that seal impressions of two individuals mentioned in the same verses of the Bible have been found together in an archaeological context (see below) and these concentrations of seals are to be expected in the remains of royal archives.

Excavation in the same area also found evidence of other important biblical figures from somewhat later in Judah's history – shortly before its fall. In 2008, during work conducted just south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, excavators discovered a seal impression inscribed with the name "Gedaliah son of Pashur" – one of the enemies of Jeremiah who attempted to have the prophet killed (Jeremiah 38:1–6).

The seal was found just yards from the spot where, three years earlier, another seal had been found with the name of another of Jeremiah's enemies – "Jehukal son of Shelemiah." Both Gedaliah and Jehukal were high-ranking officials of Judah's last king – Zedekiah – and there is no question that the discovered seals belonged to exactly these individuals, as the seals give the names of the father of each individual and these exactly match what the Bible records.

And there is perhaps more of this evidence. During the 1970's, two clay seal impressions surfaced on the antiquities market. These items had an identical impression, made by the same seal stamp. They read: "Belonging to Berechiahu, son of Neriahu, the Scribe" – or, as the English Bible records the name "Baruch, son of Neriah" – the personal scribe of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 36:32).

Although there is often a degree of uncertainty relating to artifacts that appear on the antiquities market, recent analysis of these seals suggests that earlier suspicions regarding their authenticity may be unwarranted. A number of known seals of Hezekiah had been presumed to be forgeries until Eilat Mazar's discovery of an identical Hezekiah seal in controlled excavation proved that they were not.

The Beginning of the End: Judah

Despite the efforts of Judah's better kings, biblical and archaeological evidence both show that what happened to the northern tribes of Israel – both religiously and politically – was eventually repeated by the southern kingdom of Judah. By the time of Hezekiah, Assyria had become a major threat to surrounding nations and after it attacked the northern tribes of Israel (see Chapter 9) the Assyrian monarch Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) turned his attention to Judah. The Bible records that Hezekiah wisely prepared defenses against the inevitable Assyrian attack (2 Chronicles 32:5), and archaeology has substantiated many of the things we are told the king did. For instance, a 211-foot (65-m) section of Jerusalem's outer wall has been excavated and dated to Hezekiah's time.

On the other hand, archaeology can sometimes correct our assumptions in situations like this. After extensive study, another section of Jerusalem's wall, in the City of David – long assumed to have been constructed by Hezekiah – was correctly dated to the reign of his great-grandfather, Uzziah, and found to have been built after a huge earthquake exactly as the Bible described (2 Chronicles 26:9-10; Amos 1:1; Zechariah 14:5).

In addition to strengthening Jerusalem's fortifications, Hezekiah appears to have laid up supplies in Jerusalem and other cities in large storage jars marked *l-mlk* "for the king." Thousands of these jars – one bearing Hezekiah's name – have been found. Hezekiah also diverted a major water source – the spring of Gihon just outside the city walls – by means of a long tunnel that carried the water into the Pool of Siloam in the lower part of the city in case Jerusalem was besieged (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:2–4, 30). "Hezekiah's Tunnel," as it is called, was discovered in modern times, and the 1,750 feet (533 m) long water conduit was found to have been cut through solid rock in an amazing feat of ancient engineering – celebrated in an inscription carved inside the tunnel that commemorated its completion.

Sennacherib did eventually attack Judah, destroying a number of its cities such as the heavily fortified Lachish – which has been confirmed in excavation of the site as well as in Assyrian accounts. Reaching Jerusalem in 701 BC, he boasted in a number of his inscriptions "I confined [Hezekiah] inside the city Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage." But the Bible states that Jerusalem was miraculously spared by a destruction of the Assyrian army (2 Kings 19:35–36; Isaiah 37:33–35). Sennacherib withdrew without capturing the city, and his inscriptions record the overthrow of Lachish, but not Jerusalem. But Judah's survival was temporary. Although the Assyrian empire was overthrown by Babylonian kings, Babylon then became the next threat to Judah.

Judah's next good king – Josiah (640–609 BC) – instituted sweeping religious reforms, and the Bible tells us that "while he was still young … he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols" (2 Chronicles 34:3). Archaeology has confirmed this in finding evidence of the destruction of these pagan-inspired religious sites in many areas of Judah. It is also to around the time of Josiah that two small silver scrolls date that were discovered in 1979 at Ketef Hinnom, near Jerusalem. When unrolled, these miniature scrolls were found to be inscribed with a variation of the Priestly Blessing, found in Numbers 6:24–26, and are the oldest known surviving texts from the Bible.

Unfortunately, Josiah was killed in a battle with the invading Egyptian Pharaoh Neco II at Megiddo in 609 BC (2 Kings 23:29). Neco replaced Josiah's son Jehoahaz (who was taken back to Egypt as a prisoner) with a ruler of his choice – Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:31–34). But by 605 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II had expelled the Egyptians from the area and took a select group of Judean royalty and nobles to Babylon to be trained to serve as officials there. The biblical Daniel and his friends were part of that group (Daniel 1:1–4).

In the reign of Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem and took the Judean king back to Babylon as a prisoner along with some 10,000 other captives. Nebuchadnezzar

then installed Jehoiakim's uncle, Zedekiah as vassal king of Judah, but – despite the strong opposition of the prophet Jeremiah – Zedekiah soon revolted against Nebuchadnezzar. As a result, in 589–587 BC Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, which fell after a 30-month siege. Archaeology confirms that the Babylonians then systematically destroyed much of the city (including Solomon's Temple) and took a great many of its inhabitants as captives to Babylon. A governor was appointed by the Babylonians over the few people who were left – bringing to an end over five hundred years of Israelite independence and this era of biblical history.

1. Shua Kisilevitz, Oded Lipschits, "Another Temple in Judah: The Tale of Tel Moẓa" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 46:1 (2020): 40-49.

11. Exile and Return

The Neo-Assyrian Empire – that took the northern tribes of Israel captive – practiced a policy of relocation of the populations it conquered – both to lessen the chances of their future rebellion and also to utilize the captives as a workforce. The Babylonian empire, which eventually overthrew Assyria, continued the practice of relocation of captive populations, and so a great many people of the southern kingdom of Judah were likewise deported after the fall of Jerusalem.

Deportations were not usually total, however. Both the Assyrians and Babylonians often left individuals who were old or in poor health, and the extreme poor of the land as they posed little threat of further rebellion and were difficult to move to distant areas. Deportations also usually involved successive groups being relocated rather than the majority of a population being moved at a single time.

The End of Israel

An initial Assyrian deportation of peoples from Galilee and other parts of northern Israel occurred in 734 BC and is described in 2 Kings 15:29 as well as in Assyrian records. After the fall of Samaria, according to Assyrian texts, another deportation of 27,280 people relocated Israelites from Samaria to various places in the empire and as far away as the area of modern Iran (2 Kings 18:11).

Many of these deportees – and especially highly skilled people such as craftsmen, scholars and cultural elites – were utilized for their skills. Other non-skilled individuals were used in various menial and labor-intensive jobs. At the same time, captives from other parts of the Assyrian Empire were resettled in the largely depopulated areas of Israel, and these mixed peoples became the Samaritans of later history.

But what became of the Israelite tribes removed by the Assyrians – the so-called "Lost Ten Tribes"? The ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel were Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Manasseh, and Ephraim. Despite theories attempting to identify these lost tribes with modern people groups, there is no real evidence that they maintained their identity at all. Based on biblical and archaeological evidence, we know that a number of the northern tribes were not deported. While some tribes from the Transjordan and Galilee were relocated, 2 Chronicles 30:1–11 explicitly mentions northern Israelites who were left in place by the Assyrians – especially those of the tribes of Dan, Ephraim, Manasseh, Asher, and Zebulun who were invited to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival in the time of Hezekiah.

Later in history, the prophetess Anna, who witnessed the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, is named as being of the (supposedly lost) tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36). So a great many people of the ten northern tribes continued to live in their own areas, and many others were assimilated into the populations of areas where they were taken – especially because Assyria encouraged the mixing of deportees and native inhabitants in order to eradicate their previous religious and political identities.

Judah in Babylon and Beyond

After the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the surviving population – the people of Judah, Benjamin, and the priestly tribe of Levi (which did not have its own territory) – were dispersed. Although some people were left, many thousands were forcibly relocated to Babylonia in several waves of deportation.

In the reign of Jehoiachin (598–597 BC), Nebuchadnezzar took the Judean king back to Babylon as his prisoner along with his mother, sons, and some 10,000 other captives. The son and successor of Nebuchadnezzar, Amēl-Marduk (the biblical Evil-Merodach) later released the Jewish king, however. Archaeology sheds amazing light on this incident because the Bible states that

Jehoiachin was allowed to eat at Amēl-Marduk's table and was granted a daily food ration (2 Kings 25:27–30). A cuneiform text found in the excavation of the administrative archives at Babylon includes the actual ration list for the Judean king and his sons: "10 sila [measures] to Jehoiachin the son of [Jehoiakim] the king of Judah. 2 ½ sila for the five sons of the king of Judah." It would be hard to find a more detailed confirmation of something written in the Bible than this.

The Bible records the dates of three subsequent waves of Jewish deportation, along with the number of people exiled in each. In Nebuchadnezzar's seventh, eighteenth and twenty-third years (597, 586, 582 BC respectively) 3,023, 832, and 745 people were deported (Jeremiah 52:28–30). Archaeology indicates that many of the unskilled Jewish captives were utilized in dredging the extensive canal systems used for transportation and irrigation in Babylonia (hence the biblical dirge "By the waters of Babylon" – Psalm 137).

More skilled people were often given responsible jobs in government and commerce, and many were able to become financially successful in Babylon. This is documented in the literally hundreds of receipts and other texts of this time period that have been archaeologically discovered in Babylonia recording transfers and payments to individuals with Hebrew names such as Nachim-Yama (Nehemiah), and Zakar-Yama (Zechariah) found in the Bible. One Judean family is documented over four generations, starting with the father, Samak-Yama, his son, grandson and his grandson's five children, all with biblical Hebrew names.

More importantly, the Babylonian deportation policy was largely one of simple resettlement in which the captives were allowed to keep their social and religious structures and identity – making it possible for the Jews to later return from exile with their national identity relatively intact. However, while the Jews were held in Babylonia, many gradually lost their knowledge of Hebrew, and almost all learned and began to use Aramaic, the language of the Neo-Babylonian empire. And while many Judeans returned to

Jerusalem when they were eventually free to do so, many others stayed and built up a vibrant Jewish community that eventually produced the Babylonian Talmud.

The scattering of the Jewish people also occurred in other directions. Some fled before the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, and a significant number fled to Egypt later for fear of Babylonian reprisals when Jewish partisans assassinated the governor of Judah appointed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:26). Thus, the people of Judah were dispersed from almost one end of the ancient Near East to the other and many would not return from this diaspora, though others would have the opportunity to do so.

Return from Exile

The Babylonian Empire came to an end when the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BC. The final days of the Babylonian kings are described in the biblical book of Daniel, which critics long assailed because Daniel mentions Belshazzar as Babylon's final king (Daniel 5), while Babylonian inscriptions show the final king was Nabonidus. But archaeology clarifies this situation.

We know from other Babylonian sources that Nabonidus spent much of his time in Arabia, and his son Belshazzar, the crown prince, evidently ruled in his place when Nabonidus was not in Babylon. That is doubtless why Daniel tells us Belshazzar promised that whoever could decipher the mysterious writing that had appeared on the palace wall would be made the *third* highest person in the kingdom (Daniel 5:7).

After Babylon fell, the benevolent Persian emperor Cyrus (590-529 BC) allowed many of the captive populations that were being held in Babylonia to return to their homelands and so he issued a decree permitting the Jews to return to Judah and to rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:1–4). A barrel-shaped clay inscription of this decree known as the "Cyrus Cylinder" was discovered in Babylon and confirms Cyrus' restoration of religious sanctuaries and his repatriation of deported peoples. It is now in the British Museum.

Figure 9. The “Cyrus Cylinder” which records the Persian emperor’s decree that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Image by Prioryman, Wikimedia.

In 537 BC Zerubbabel, grandson of the Jewish king Jehoiachin, led a group of over sixty thousand exiles back to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel was appointed governor of the Judean province under the Persians, and with his leadership rebuilding of the temple of God was begun on the site of the destroyed temple of Solomon (Ezra 2–4). But opposition from non-Jewish groups in the area led to a hiatus in the temple’s rebuilding until the reign of the Persian emperor Darius I (522–486 BC), who issued an edict commanding punishment for all who tried to impede the Jewish reconstruction. As a result, the rebuilt temple was completed in 515 BC (Ezra 6:1–15).

Also in this period, the walls and fortifications of Jerusalem were rebuilt. The Bible records that, with permission from the emperor Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC) the emperor’s “cup-bearer” Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of the city, which were still in ruins in many areas. We are unsure just how much of Jerusalem these rebuilt walls surrounded, but archaeology has found evidence of the walls, nonetheless.

In 2007, archaeologist Eilat Mazar discovered a length of wall in Jerusalem that had been constructed on top of the remains of a

much earlier wall. Mazar was able to identify the newer wall with the hasty construction completed in Nehemiah's time (Nehemiah 6:15). Comparing the location of the wall she discovered with the biblical description, Mazar was even able identify the individual who built that section: Nehemiah, son of Azbuk (Nehemiah 3:15-16 – a supervisor with the same name as the book's main figure).[1]

A final detail worth noting is that the Bible records the names of Nehemiah's three primary enemies at this time: Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian. Two of these individuals – Sanballat and Geshem –have been identified through archaeological excavations. Tobiah has not yet been substantiated, but archaeology has proved his name was common in that period.

From Nehemiah to the New Testament

After the time of Nehemiah, the book of Malachi, composed around 420 BC, completes the Old Testament chronologically – leaving a period of some four hundred years between the conclusion of the Old Testament writings and the beginning of the New Testament. Although the Bible is silent on events of this time period – from Malachi to Matthew – important archaeological discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and other texts continue to shed much light back onto the Old Testament writings as well as forward to the world of the New Testament. It is to that final biblical era that we will now turn.

1. Eilat Mazar, *The Summit of the City of David Excavations 2005–2008, Final Reports Volume I*. Shoham Academic Research and Publication, 2015.

12. The New Testament Era

In the centuries between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament era, the language, culture, and government of the Holy Land changed completely. The ancient Near East went from the control of the Persians, to the Greeks, and finally to the Romans. By the time Jesus was born, around 4 or 5 BC (the "BC" date is confirmed by a great deal of historical evidence), the regions of Judea, Samaria and Idumea (the Old Testament Edom) had been incorporated into the Roman province of Judea and were ruled by the puppet king Herod the Great (c. 72–74 BC), the powerful but insecure monarch who attempted to have the infant Jesus killed (Matthew 2:16).

Despite his ruthlessness and other personal failings, Herod was the most prolific builder in the history of ancient Israel, and the massive and often magnificent structures – fortresses, palaces, and other buildings – he constructed were a major reason for his being given the descriptive title "the Great."

The Temple of Herod

Above all his building projects, the temple Herod built for the Jewish population of Judea ranks first. Herod began to build this temple in 20 BC and although it was functional after a few years, it was not fully embellished for eighty years, until around AD 63. The structure was a massive one many times larger than the temple Solomon had built, or the temple constructed by Zerubbabel after the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. Herod's temple was, of course, the setting of so many events recorded in the New Testament.

The gospels record the magnificence of this temple, which was one of the largest and most beautiful sacred precincts in the ancient world, but they also record Jesus' words that the structure would be destroyed and not one stone left on another (Mark 13:1–2). In AD

70 this came to pass when the armies of Rome completely destroyed the temple after a Jewish rebellion.

As a result of this destruction, little of Herod's temple has survived in place, yet archaeology has been able to confirm many details of the structure and to recover some of its features. The Western or "Wailing" Wall in Jerusalem contains massive limestone blocks that were part of the original enclosure wall of the temple complex.

A number of years ago the Israeli archaeologist Benjamin Mazar discovered the remains of the massive "Stairs of Ascent" by which pilgrims entered the temple on its south side. Excavation has also found that there were eight gates leading into the temple complex from the surrounding city, and the archaeological remains of *mikvahs* or ritual baths used for purification by those entering the temple have been excavated near several of these gates in the walls.

A stone block also found in the excavations was part of the balustrade railing around the top of the temple complex wall. This stone was inscribed in Hebrew "to the place of trumpeting to ush[er] …" and apparently marked the location where a trumpet was blown each week to ritually usher in the Sabbath Day.

Within the temple complex, a wall divided the "Court of the Gentiles" from the inner courts of the temple, where only Jews were allowed to enter (the "dividing wall" that Paul spoke of in Ephesians 2:14). We know from the ancient Jewish historian Josephus that inscriptions were carved in Greek on blocks set into this wall that warned:

ΜΗΘΕΝΑΑΛΛΟΓΕΝΗΕΙΣΠΟ
ΡΕΥΕΣΘΑΙΕΝΤΟΣΤΟΥΠΕ
ΡΙΤΟΙΕΡΟΝΤΡΥΦΑΚΤΟΥΚΑΙ
ΠΕΡΙΒΟΛΟΥΟΣΔΑΝΛΗ
ΦΘΗΕΑΥΤΩΙΑΙΤΙΟΣΕΣ
ΤΑΙΔΙΑΤΟΕΞΑΚΟΛΟΥ
ΘΕΙΝΘΑΝΑΤΟΝ

“No foreigner may enter … the sanctuary and the enclosure. Whoever is caught, will be himself responsible for his ensuing death.” Two of these inscribed blocks have been found and may be seen today in archaeological museums in Jerusalem (partially complete) and in Istanbul (complete).

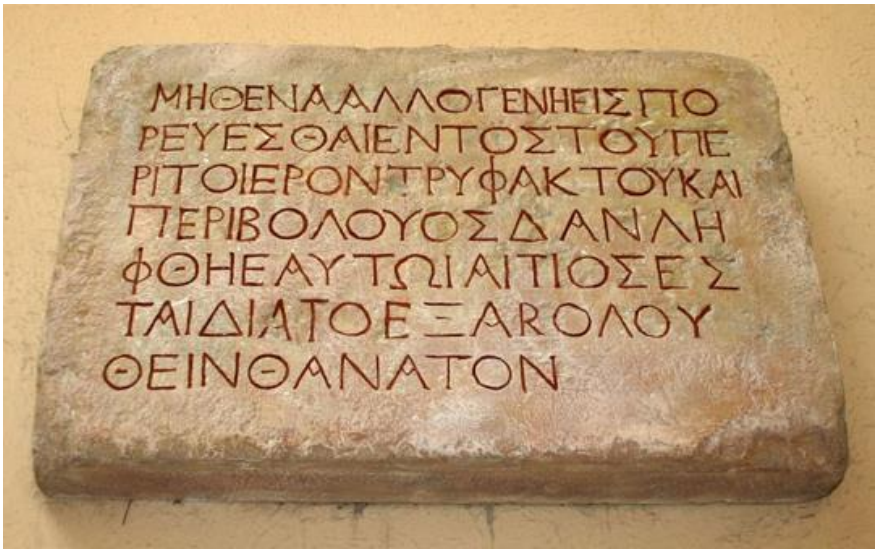

Figure 10. Copy of the Jerusalem Temple Warning Inscription.
Image by Giovanni Dall'Orto, Wikimedia.

It is even possible that some of the actual cedar timbers that were incorporated into the construction of the temple building itself have survived,[1] but these possible beams and the stones mentioned above are the only substantial parts known to remain of Herod’s temple.

Nevertheless, an ambitious archaeological initiative – The Temple Mount Sifting Project – instituted by Israeli archaeologist Gabriel Barkay and conducted over the past fifteen or more years, has painstakingly wet-sifted many tons of earth that were removed from the top of the temple mount in the construction of Moslem buildings that now occupy the area. This project has recovered thousands of fragmentary items from the successive Jewish temples, including fragments of hundreds of *opus sectile* (Latin:

"cut work") polished stone floor tiles that were used to pave the floors of Herod's temple in beautiful geometric patterns. The recovery of these meticulously cut and polished polychrome tiles has given us a good idea of what the temple floor must have looked like. Considering the nearly total destruction of Herod's temple, archaeology has done much to confirm and visualize this magnificent structure that has not existed for some two thousand years.

Jesus and Places

The death of the accomplished but tyrannical Herod occurred shortly after the birth of Jesus, and just as archaeology has confirmed aspects of Herod's life, it has also been able to confirm aspects of the life of Jesus. Jesus, of course, left no physical monuments, and we cannot expect to find direct records of anyone who was not part of the political or religious leaders of that culture – and who was, in fact, rejected by them. Yet we have been able to substantiate many of the details found in the New Testament accounts of Christ's ministry.

For instance, the dramatic story of how Jesus healed a blind man and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem (John 9:1–11) is such a story. Traditionally, the Siloam Pool was thought to be the pool where a church was built by the Byzantine empress Eudocia (c. A.D. 400–460) to commemorate the miracle recounted in the New Testament. However, the exact location of the original pool as it existed during the time of Jesus remained a mystery until only recently.

Early excavations conducted in the 1890's led to the uncovering of some of the steps of the pool itself near the City of David to the southeast of the traditional site, and in the 1960's famed British archeologist Kathleen Kenyon found more of the steps. In 2004, municipal work exposed additional steps and subsequently Israel's archaeological authority began systematic excavation of the area. These excavations have confirmed the location of the pool and

found that it was larger than previously thought – 225 feet wide and approximately 1.25 acres in area. Long steps descended into the pool allowing visitors to immerse and cleanse themselves in the water – just as John indicated.

Another pool in Jerusalem, the Pool of Bethesda, where Jesus is said to have healed a paralyzed man (John 5:2), was once dismissed as being a fictional location as no such pool was known. But this pool and its colonnades were found a number of years ago – located by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem just as John described it. Today tour guides in Jerusalem regularly take groups to see this supposedly "non-existent" place.

Similarly, critics once claimed that the story of Jesus speaking in the synagogue at Capernaum (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31) could not be true as there were no synagogues in Galilee till after the fall of Jerusalem. But investigation has shown that beneath the fourth- or fifth-century "White Synagogue" at Capernaum lies another much older building that appears to lack the features of later synagogues and which is now thought to date to the period of Jesus.

Even some aspects of Jesus' teachings are illuminated by what archaeology has found regarding the places where he is said to have taught. For example, excavation has found that a major industry manufacturing grain grinding mills from a favored type of stone was located at Capernaum – where Jesus spoke of being the "Bread of Life." And archaeology has found evidence of the great hill of earth that Herod moved in making his fortress of Herodium – which was visible from the area where Jesus spoke to his disciples about having faith that could move mountains (Matthew 17:20).

Jesus and People

A great many of the individuals mentioned in the gospels, or with whom Jesus is said to have interacted, have also been attested archaeologically. The existence of Herod the Great was doubted at one time – one of America's founding fathers, Thomas Paine, wrote a criticism of the Bible in which he said: "There could be no such

person as a King Herod because the Jews and their country were then under the dominion of the Roman emperors who governed then by tetrarchs, or governors."[2] Archaeology has proven Paine wrong in dozens of ways ranging from texts speaking of Herod as king, to HRWD BACI "King Herod" coins of his reign.

Another major figure in the gospel accounts, Pontius Pilate, ruled as the Roman Prefect of Judea from AD 26-36. In addition to his infamous role in Christ's crucifixion, we know that Pilate initiated several building projects in Judea. In 1961, an inscribed stone was unearthed in excavations of one of his projects near the theater at Caesarea Maritima. Three of the original four lines of text are still legible and included the Latin words PONTIUS PILATUS PREFECTUS IUDAEAE "Pontius Pilate Prefect of Judea."

More recently, a second artifact with Pilate's name on it has been discovered. During the 1968-69 excavations at Herod's fortress of Herodium, a copper ring was discovered in an archaeological layer that dated to around the time of Pilate. In 2018, the ring was cleaned and found to bear the Greek inscription ΠΙΛΑΤΟ (PILATO). This does not mean the ring belonged to Pilate – such rings were used to mark and send items to the individual whose name was inscribed on them, but the fact that the ring confirms Pilate is clear.

While he was Prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate minted two types of coins which have been found. These coins bore Roman religious symbols and show the insensitivity of Pilate to the religion of his Jewish subjects – as is confirmed in the New Testament and many other contemporary texts – a situation that underlies the fact Pilate was summoned back to Rome in AD 37 and tried for his cruelty and inept governing.

Two final examples of evidence of the contemporaries of Jesus can be seen regarding the story of his trial and crucifixion. The gospels tell us that when he was arrested, Jesus was taken to the house of Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57; Luke 22:54), whose full name in Aramaic was *Yosef bar Caiapha* (Joseph, son of Caiaphas). In 1990 excavation of a tomb near Jerusalem revealed a group of limestone

ossuaries or "bone boxes." One of these ossuaries was inscribed with the name *Yosef bar Cipha* and it is widely agreed that this ossuary may well be that of the high priest. In another excavation, another ossuary was found bearing the names "Alexander" and "Simon" on the front and "Simon" and "Alexander [son] of Simon" on the back. The location and date of this ossuary indicates it could be that of the Simon who carried Jesus' cross, and of his son Alexander (Mark 15:21).

The Disciples

Like Jesus himself, the twelve disciples were from humble backgrounds, and we should not expect them to have left direct physical evidence of themselves. Yet the disciples' importance in the Christian faith meant that subsequent followers of Jesus might well have preserved the knowledge of the location of their homes, for example, and archaeology can perhaps help us substantiate these possibilities.

This is perhaps the case regarding the home of the chief apostle, Peter. The Gospel of John clearly states that the home of Peter was at Bethsaida (John 1:44), but Matthew, Mark, and Luke all seem to indicate that it was at Capernaum (Matthew 8:14–17; Mark 1:29–31; Luke 4:38–39). It is possible, of course, that Peter had two homes, or that he lived in one and then the other. Interestingly, archaeology has indicated the possibility of not one, but two homes in which Peter lived – one at Capernaum and one at Bethsaida!

At Capernaum, between the synagogue discussed earlier in this chapter and Lake Galilee, the remains of a block of small fishing houses from the first century were excavated. According to Christian traditions, one of these houses was the home of Peter, and one of these houses was remarkably different from the others. Excavation showed that originally it was just a simple dwelling, but in the second half of the first century it was renovated and one of its rooms made exceptionally large – about 23 by 21 feet (7 by 6.5 meters). Uniquely for Capernaum, the floor and walls of this room

were coated with thick plaster, and the excavators did not find the usual fragments of domestic pottery in it, only the remains of small oil lamps.

These facts lead many scholars to believe that from the time soon after the life of Peter, early Christians met to worship here. In the fourth century AD the structure was expanded and surrounded by a wall, and in the fifth century an octagonal church or martyrium was constructed over the original room. The combination of these finds and the descriptions of early pilgrims who visited the house of Peter indicate this was probably a/the house in which the apostle lived.

More recently, excavations have been conducted at El-Araj which some scholars think is the site of the other biblical fishing village on the Sea of Galilee where Peter is said to have lived–Bethsaida. At this site there are remains of a Byzantine basilica in which a mosaic inscription was found mentioning "the chief and commander of the heavenly apostles." This suggests the ancient church may have been built to commemorate Peter; and according to tradition, the church was built over the house of the apostles Peter and Andrew.

But although critics have stressed that the church itself dates to the fifth century, the most recent excavations have discovered, deep under the apse, the remains of a first-century wall. This new find adds more weight to the belief that the church there may have been built over the ruins of a home of Peter. Further excavation may help confirm this possibility.

A final example of possible archaeological evidence for individuals associated with Jesus – in this case, one of his own family members – is found in the existence of an inscribed ancient ossuary from Jerusalem that may have contained the burial of James the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem Church (as opposed to the apostle James, brother of John). The limestone box bears the Aramaic inscription: "Jacob son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" – Jacob being the original Hebrew/Aramaic form of the name we know as "James."

The authenticity of the ossuary, which was not discovered in a controlled archaeological context, was quickly disputed and claimed

to be a forgery by some, although a number of leading experts concluded it is genuine. The years since this artifact's discovery have seen an ongoing back-and-forth denial and acceptance between those who accept it and those who do not, but some of the world's most eminent epigraphers, André Lemaire, Ada Yardeni, and Emile Puech, have concluded that the inscription is authentic, and have responded in detail to the doubts about its authenticity. Given this situation, many biblical scholars now accept that the ossuary of James is indeed, authentic.[3]

Archaeology has discovered far more evidence for people mentioned in the New Testament than can be covered in this brief survey, and it also continues to uncover evidence of those who followed the original disciples – subsequent generations of Christians and the growth of the early church – but that is another story beyond the scope of this book.

1. Peretz Reuven, "Wooden Beams from Herod's Temple Mount: Do They Still Exist?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 39:3 (2013): 40–47.

2. Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason*, Part III, Section 2.

3. Brian Windle, "Weighing the Evidence: Is the James Ossuary Authentic?" *Bible Archaeology Report*, April 20, 2023.

Conclusion:
The Past in the Future

We said at the outset of this book that archaeology cannot somehow prove the Bible to everyone's satisfaction, but it can present a great deal of evidence for the veracity of much that the Bible says. Although this book has only been able to present a brief survey of what archaeology has been able to show us regarding the biblical record, the sheer volume of the evidence it has unearthed cannot be dismissed. As we have seen, archaeology has confirmed the historical reality of literally dozens of individuals mentioned in the Bible, and it has illuminated hundreds of the places, situations, and events that form the backdrop to the biblical narratives.

New discoveries are being made all the time. For example, in 2023 archaeologists were mystified by channels they discovered had been dug into the bedrock in the oldest part of Jerusalem. Further work revealed that the channels were actually part of a huge moat – almost like the moats around medieval European castles – almost one hundred feet wide and at least twenty feet deep. The moat dated to the ninth century BC and separated the Temple Mount from the older, lower City of David area when Jerusalem was the capital of Judah, and possibly earlier.

Like a castle moat, this feature may have protected part of the city from attack or may have simply separated key royal and religious areas from the rest of the city. "In all our reconstructions of what Jerusalem looked like back then, we just have a continuous urban landscape from the Temple Mount down to the bottom of the City of David," excavation co-director Yiftah Shalev said. "This discovery completely changes that picture."

But the biblically significant thing about this discovery – though it may not relate to the Bible directly – is that it shows how a truly extensive and massive feature has stayed hidden beneath people's feet for hundreds of years. It is a perfect example of the fact that the

argument we have not found evidence for some aspect of the Bible may often be countered by the simple word "yet."

Certainly there is much still to be found, but ongoing excavations are doubtless closing in on many still-hidden features and artifacts of importance. For example, Nehemiah 3:16 records that the tombs of the kings of Judah are located alongside a massive stepped structure, at the end of the section of wall built by Nehemiah, son of Azbuk. The tombs have not yet been found – but the recent discovery of that portion of Nehemiah's wall raises the likelihood that the nearby tombs may also be discovered.

As we have frequently seen in this book, archaeology is not just about finding previously lost sites and artifacts; it also involves continued study and analysis of already discovered objects through the use of new techniques and technologies. A case in point is a recent archaeo-medical study that has clarified who the ancient Philistines were and where they came from. Between 1997 and 2016, researchers examined the remains – dating from the twelfth to the sixth centuries BC – of more than one hundred humans from the Philistine city of Ashkelon in Israel.

DNA was recovered from these remains and its recent analysis showed the Philistines came from where the Bible says they did, when they did. Amos 9:7 tells us the Philistines came from Caphtor, and while it has long been suspected Caphtor was the ancient name for the island of Crete, the DNA study showed that many of the individuals came, indeed, from Crete in the time of the biblical Judges.

So both new and old archaeological finds continue to give us confidence that the biblical writers accurately recorded historical people and events. While these results may not prove the Bible for some, it is beyond question that for many the thousands of archaeological findings relating to the Bible not only help to illuminate the Scriptures in hundreds of ways, but they also help to establish, confirm, and encourage our trust in what the Scriptures record. Our knowledge of the past, and of what the Bible tells us of it, has a very bright future.

Appendix:
Archaeology and Chronology

Ultimately, the significance of archaeological finds can never be known if they cannot be situated in a time frame. Chronology is the underlying framework to which every archaeological artifact and site must be attached whenever possible. The brief paragraphs below summarize some basic but important concepts regarding this relationship between archaeology and chronology.

Absolute and Relative Chronology

Archaeologists actually deal with two kinds of chronology: absolute and relative. Absolute chronology exists where we can establish the date of archaeological remains on a time frame that is linked to the present – for example, an absolute date of 1200 BC is meaningful to us because we know it was approximately 3200 years ago (or BP – "Before Present," as archaeologists say). Relative chronology is less clear and exists when there is no way to tie a date to the present – it can only be established that a date was before or after something else of which the absolute date is also unknown. Thus, we may be able to tell that a buried wall was made before another building was erected on top of it, but without absolute evidence such as pottery or other datable artifacts found in the same level, we can only assign a relative date to the wall as having been sometime before the date of the overlying structure. Relative chronological dates were once common in archaeology, but today the much larger number of dating techniques available to excavators means absolute dates are more likely to be determined. This concept is important for readers of the Bible to understand because the Bible often gives only relative chronological pointers in its accounts of early (pre-Israelite) times and we often cannot pin these events into an absolute chronology.

The Three-Age System

In the past, archaeologists working in different areas of the world used different time scales for dating things. For example, while an excavator in Egypt might determine that a find dated to the "Eighteenth Dynasty," another archaeologist working in the area of Mesopotamia might refer to an artifact as dating to the "Isin-Larsa Period." This is one of the reasons why the system of material ages – Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, and their subdivisions (see the chronological chart at the beginning of this book) – is widely used by archaeologists because a specialist working in one area can relate finds to the chronology of other areas. Sometimes the beginning and ending dates of these ages have to be adjusted for local differences (for example, one area might have utilized iron before another), but generally speaking the three-age system provides an archeological time-frame that is widely applicable. Of course, the material used in a culture's technology is not the only measure by which archaeologists analyze the past – other factors include social organization, food sources, the adoption of agriculture, cooking, urbanization, etc. – but the three-age system has proven its usefulness.

Stratigraphy

Archaeologists often use stratigraphic excavation to remove phases of a site one layer at a time. This keeps the timeline of the material remains consistent with one another across the site and helps the excavator to understand the relationship of different strata to each other. Although the upper units of stratification are usually younger and the lower are older, the oldest strata are not always those deepest down as disturbances such as the digging of wells or pits can invert strata and the oldest artifacts may sometimes be discovered near the surface! Strata with evidence of physical destruction are particularly valuable in biblical archaeology because destruction layers – for example the destruction of Jerusalem by

the Babylonians, or later by the Romans, help provide clear chronological benchmarks. Good stratigraphy is a complex skill and many of the greatest excavators have been among the best stratigraphers.

Archaeological Horizons

Another term often encountered in archaeology is "horizon." Generally, a horizon is a distinctive type of sediment, artifact, style, or other cultural trait that is found across a geographical area from a limited time period. Most typically in biblical archaeology, there is a change across a number of sites in the type of pottery found. For example, we find a clear change in pottery styles with the arrival of the Philistines in Canaan. When the same type of artifact or style is found over a large area, it can often be assumed that these remains are approximately contemporary.

Chronological Reconstructions

In biblical archaeology, the traditional dating system amongst archaeologists is known as the High Chronology. In the High Chronology, the Late Bronze Age ended in roughly 1200 BC, the Iron Age I lasted from around 1200-1000 BC, and the Iron Age IIA began around 1000 BC. These periods correspond to Israel's appearance in the central hill country of Canaan, the period of the Judges, and the united monarchy of King David and King Solomon, respectively. More recently, another chronological framework was proposed which is called the "Low Chronology," and which compressed the Iron IIA period by roughly one hundred years. This seemingly fit some sites better, but it does not fit well with others and today more biblical archaeologists follow the traditional, or a modified form of the traditional, High Chronology. This book follows the High Chronology.

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