

How Can Archaeology Contribute to the Study of the Bible?

Alan Millard

Oriental Studies, University of Liverpool

The first of two studies on Biblical Archaeology

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Phylacteries of Jesus' Day

'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing', Jesus said, in effect, 'Let your piety be privately or modestly performed' (Matt. 6:3). One of the fashions he attacked was wearing big phylacteries: 'They make their phylacteries wide' (Matt. 23:5). What was he talking about? Visitors to the Wailing Wall (or Western Wall) in Jerusalem today will see the orthodox Jews at prayer wearing their phylacteries. Strapped to the left arm and to the forehead are leather boxes, each about two inches square. Inside them are parchment sheets bearing texts from the Law, including the passages which instruct the Israelites to write God's commands on their foreheads and on their hearts (Ex. 13:9, 16; Dt. 6:8; 11:18). The phylacteries are put on for prayer, then taken off. They are very obvious. A number of phylacteries belonging to the Gospel period have been found near Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. They are tiny. The best preserved leather pouch is 0.79 inch long, and 0.51 inch wide. Inside it were four small pieces of thin leather bearing the sacred texts written in minute letters. Very thin leather thongs held these phylacteries in place. Once tied to the head or arm they would barely be visible and might be worn all day. No big phylacteries from the first century are known, but the modern ones may show what they were like. The tiny ones illustrate vividly the sense of Jesus' words, they would have met with his approval!

The Seal of Jeremiah's Secretary?

When Jeremiah prophesied exile to his fellow-citizens, he also had a message of reassurance, there would be a return. To demonstrate this, he bought a plot of land and had one copy of the deed sealed and put in a jar to be preserved for the time when land would again be bought and sold (Jer. 32). In the damp hills of Judah a document on papyrus or leather would decay in a few decades if exposed to the weather. If we assume the jar was buried for safety, the process of decay could be hindered, but would not be halted. Recently large numbers of the sealings attached to deeds like Jeremiah's have come to light, although the documents themselves have perished. When an ancient Hebrew letter or deed was written, it was folded and tied. For security a small lump of clay was pressed over the cord. The stone seal of the sender of the letter or one or more of the parties to the deed was pressed onto the clay to guarantee the document. These seal stones, and so their impressions, were usually very small, half an inch to one inch long, with the owners' names engraved on them in ancient Hebrew script. The hundreds of examples now known show that Jeremiah's action was part of a common process. One clay imprint may bring a closer contact with the prophet, for it was made by the seal of

'Berechiah, son of Neriah, the scribe'. Now the name of Jeremiah's secretary Baruch is a short form of Berechiah, and Baruch the scribe's father was Neriah (Jer. 36 etc.). While a coincidence of names is possible, the likelihood is strong that this sealing belonged to a document relating to Jeremiah's friend.

These are two examples of recent archaeological discoveries which illuminate the understanding of biblical passages, examples of a study which can truly be called Biblical Archaeology. The Bible is a collection of ancient books, and to understand it as fully as possible its ancient context should be explored as thoroughly as possible. That is not to say that the Bible can only be understood when its readers know about biblical archaeology, for the Bible's message has been plain to every type of person since its conception, but in an age of scientific investigation and emphasis on facts and evidence, biblical studies cannot afford to ignore the contributions of archaeology.

What Sort of Contribution can Archaeology Make?

The examples of the phylacteries and the seal of Berechiah are two from a varied store of 'illustrations' which archaeology offers for the biblical text. The people and events of whom we read gain reality and vividness when we can visualize them in their surroundings. Two more examples demonstrate this in relation to more important moments in biblical history.

Abraham's Home-town

The first is the case of Abraham who left the urban culture of Babylonian Ur in obedience to God's command. In Genesis 11 nothing is said about Ur, except that the patriarch lived there, and had to leave. To uproot oneself and re-settle in a different and unknown land is hard enough, and we may be able to enter some way into Abraham's feelings. (Recall how the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews appreciated the faith involved, 11:8, 9). Our appreciation of Abraham's faith and the cost of his obedience are enriched by discoveries in Babylonia. The famous archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley excavated in Ur from 1922 to 1934. In some parts of the city he uncovered ruined houses which were occupied in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries B.C. This is the period which the patriarchal stories seem to describe. The houses Woolley found were well-built of baked brick, the rooms ranged round a courtyard, with one main door leading off the street. There were carefully made kitchens and drains, and brick stairs led to an upper storey or to the roof. In the

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ruins were pieces of domestic equipment left behind when the occupants fled as enemies attacked the city. They show the high level of material culture the well-to-do citizens enjoyed. Most revealing are the cuneiform tablets recovered from several of the houses. Many come from the archives of businessmen who lent money, controlled estates, and engaged in trading ventures abroad. Several collections were found in rooms which had been used as schools for teaching the arts of reading and writing the cuneiform script. They allow us to trace the syllabus from the first attempts to make simple wedges through the stages of imitating the teacher's handwriting to copying pieces of literature and solving mathematical problems. A particular service of these school texts is to preserve

numerous examples of the hymns and prayers, myths and legends, and historical traditions current in those days. Babylonian tablets of the eighteenth century B.C. tell of man's creation by the gods, with a divine ingredient, of disturbances which resulted in the sending of the Flood, and the survival of one man and his family in a boat (The Epic of Atrahasis). These texts disclose the attitudes of the urban Babylonians to the world around them; they were suspicious of foreigners, but they despised one group especially, 'the Westerners' (Amorites) who lived in tents, ate raw meat, and did not bury their dead. It was to take up such a life that Abraham was called. From being 'a citizen of no mean city' he was to become a sort of gypsy.

Exile

The second example of archaeological illustration relates to the reverse process; the exile of Israelites to Assyria. In 701 B.C. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, attacked the small kingdom of Judah and overran the whole country except for the capital, Jerusalem. His inscriptions report the capture of forty-six towns and the deportation of 200,150 people. Why did Sennacherib do this? Was he simply an imperialist aggressor, out to expand his power? He makes his reasons clear. Hezekiah was a leader among a group of kings in Palestine who had rebelled against Assyria's hegemony, probably with Egyptian support. In Judah's case, the biblical record gives the background: Ahaz, father of Hezekiah, was threatened by the neighbouring kings of Samaria and Damascus and appealed to Assyria for help. The price of the relief and continuing protection Assyria brought was vassal status for Judah. The king of Judah remained an independent ruler but he had to pay an annual tribute to Assyria and he was not to have friendly relations with enemies of Assyria. These arrangements were set out in a pact which both sides solemnly swore to observe. Hezekiah, said Sennacherib, was in breach of the treaty and so should be punished. Often the rebellious king would be taken prisoner and perhaps lose his throne, Hezekiah escaped that fate by a miracle (to which we shall give some attention in the second study), but many of his people did not, they were taken away into exile. Exile may have meant forced labour for some, straining in gangs to haul the stone blocks into position for the gateways of Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, as some of the Assyrian reliefs show. For others the promises of the Rab-shakeh were true: 'I will take you away to a land...of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey' (2 Kings 18:32). Assyrian policy was to transport rebellious people to other countries within the empire, but once re-settled, the deportees only suffered one special restriction, they were not permitted to return to their homeland. This had been Assyrian policy for centuries before the time of Sennacherib, and was the practice of other major kingdoms, too. Exile was not a new idea to Israelites of the eighth century B.C., it was a common threat to all small ancient states. Certainly it was not a novelty when Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin and the people of Judah to Babylonia in 597 and 586 B.C., despite the impression some modern writers give. The prospect of exile as a punishment if Israel broke her covenant with God, by failing to keep his terms and by giving their allegiance to other gods, need not be seen as a reflection of what eventually happened to her, but as a warning that would be well understood as early as the time of Moses.

The reality of exile is portrayed in several sculptures from the Assyrian palaces. The rows of captives are marshalled in their conquered territories ready to be marched away. Deportation involved whole families, not just the men, and the sculptors depict the women and children, with life-like touches, a mother giving her child a drink, for example. For biblical studies the reliefs celebrating Sennacherib's capture of the Judean city of Lachish are most illuminating. As the siege of the city ends, Assyrian soldiers carry out anything valuable as booty; a chariot and large incense-burners are shown. They also drive out the citizens. Lines of them carrying their possessions in sacks slung over their shoulders shamle down from the gateway. Their simple dress and footwear show how the people who heard the prophet Isaiah speak were dressed. A few families were wealthier and can be seen with bales of goods tied up on wagons. One offers a complete family picture: mother and the children are perched on the sacks, father urges the oxen forward, and another woman sits behind the oxen with a stick, perhaps she is mother-in-law.

For these people of Lachish exile was a painful reality. The pictures of them, the Assyrian records, and evidence from other parts of the Near East, give a sharper insight into the facts of exile or deportation and its practice throughout the period of the Old Testament.

Ancient Literature

These specific examples show one way whereby archaeology can contribute to the study of the Bible. They relate to separate incidents, but there is another important contribution which has a wider impact, which extends beyond particular details. In fact, archaeology opens a fresh approach to the problem of the history of the Old Testament, an approach which is well-based and positive.

For more than a century, literary criticism has dominated the study of the Hebrew Scriptures. Today we are familiar with further methods, form-criticism, redaction-criticism, the history of traditions, but it is essential to remember that all of them are based on the results of the classic literary criticism. When that was formulated over a hundred years ago, the world of the

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ancient Near East was poorly known, so it was common to minimize the historical aspects of the Old Testament books, just as scholars did for Greek and Latin authors. Nowadays there is a much greater willingness to admit that ancient authors may be trustworthy, largely thanks to archaeological discoveries. Regrettably, the majority of Old Testament scholars still adhere to the old hypotheses and do not take adequate account of the facts now known about the biblical world. Yet there are many relevant discoveries. They can be classed in three levels.

— Written documents in ancient Israel

At the first level, thousands of written documents are now at our disposal, contemporary with the books of the Old and New Testaments. Although the majority are administrative texts and so quite different from the biblical documents in nature, they demonstrate the use of writing in the lands of the Bible. This is as true for ancient Israel as for Babylonia

and for Egypt. Papyrus was the usual writing material for the Israelites, as it was for the Egyptians, and this circumstance has robbed us of early copies of Hebrew books for, it is worth repeating, papyrus buried in damp soil rots rapidly. Therefore we cannot expect to read the original manuscripts of Isaiah or of Jeremiah, nevertheless there is no doubt such works were written on papyrus. During excavations in the City of David recently, an Israeli team found a treasure of fifty-one small lumps of clay. On one side each bears the imprint of a seal, and on the other the impressions left by fibres of papyrus which decomposed long ago. There, in Jerusalem at the time of Jeremiah, in one house someone had kept a small file of papers. The lumps of clay, bullae, prove that such papers did once exist. Now it is unusual to find societies in the ancient Near East where writing was limited to business contracts and administrative documents, rather, a fair number of books and works of literature are found, too. These are missing for ancient Israel and Judah simply because of the perishable nature of papyrus. A discovery made at Tell Deir Alla in the Jordan Valley enables us to imagine the appearance of a book in the time of Isaiah, about 700 B.C. Plaster had fallen from a pillar or the corner of a wall in some sort of shrine. When the excavators lifted the fragments from the ground, they were astonished to find lines of writing on the smooth side. After prolonged study, this badly broken inscription is seen to be a story about the seer Balaam son of Beor, in a polytheistic setting.

What is relevant here is the layout of the text which clearly imitates a column of writing as it would appear on a papyrus scroll. From such a discovery both the existence of books and their form become clearer. No-one now can deny the possibility of an Amos or an Isaiah writing their oracles or of historians in Hezekiah's reign recording the account of the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem. Furthermore, the distribution of inscribed seals and fragments of broken pottery which were used as scrap-paper demonstrates the wide diffusion of the practice of writing in the states of Israel and Judah.

— *Reconstructing the history of Israelite books*

If we allow that books existed in the Hebrew kingdoms, what can we learn that relates to the history of the books that make up the Old Testament? Literary criticism is based on the supposition that it is possible to distinguish stages in the growth of a book, using apparent differences of wording and context. By this means four sources traced in the Pentateuch, coming from various dates, verses or phrases in Amos, for example, are characterized as 'Deuteronomistic' in style, and therefore written a century or more after the prophet's lifetime. Having works of literature from cultures equally as old as Israel, and close to her, it is possible to make comparisons, and they can be instructive. Babylonia and Egypt have left us literary works in many copies from various centuries. The famous Epic of Gilgamesh furnished Babylonian schools and libraries with a major composition for more than a millennium, and several copies survive, none complete. Setting these copies side by side reveals how much of the text persisted over the centuries and what changes took place in the course of transmission. Variations are evident at every level: spelling, vocabulary, poetic style, content, and sense. Nevertheless, the story remained basically unchanged. Noticing the history of the Gilgamesh Epic and other lengthy narratives, some scholars have cited it as support for the literary analysis of the Old Testament. In fact, this does not hold good, the comparison is deceptive. It is possible

to trace the literary development of Babylonian epics and the editorial changes made to some of them only because copies from different periods are available. If manuscripts from a single century alone survive, it is all but impossible to predict how those of a later date, or an earlier, would differ. On the other hand, there are compositions which show hardly any variations, except in small details, over equally long periods of copying. The most well-known work of this sort is the Laws of Hammurabi. The black stone stele in the Louvre gives no indication of what alterations, additions, or subtractions might appear in copies made in later centuries. If we possessed nothing but the copies written a thousand years later, it would be impossible to tell whether they represented the original accurately, or not. These two types of textual history in Babylonia show that it is not very realistic to claim to be able to reconstruct the evolution of the Old Testament books when the only texts accessible come from the latest period of their history! Moreover, there have been attempts to analyze Babylonian narratives in the same fashion as the Old Testament, but without success, the criteria prove quite unsatisfactory. Estimates of the ages of particular pieces of literature on stylistic features have sometimes been undermined by the discovery of copies of the same works produced two or three centuries before the supposed time of composition! What is true with regard to Babylonian literature is also true for Hebrew literature. If the methods of analysis applied to the one do not work when they are applied to the other, then they should be put in doubt, and attempts should be made to find better methods which suit both.

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— *Reconstructing the history of Israelite religion*

The literary analysis of the Old Testament is closely related to concepts of the development of Israelite religion, the ideas crystallized by Julius Wellhausen just over a century ago. The stages of this scheme are clear: firstly the simple family cult of the Patriarchs, then the pure faith of the prophets, and finally the religion of the Law under priestly authority. Despite widespread recognition that the scheme cannot be maintained in every point, it remains the major presupposition of Old Testament studies, especially in the question of dating the 'priestly' laws to the post-exilic period.

Archaeology cannot confirm or refute this scheme unless someone finds a manuscript of the putative source document from the appropriate date, or a copy of the priestly laws which all competent epigraphists agree belongs to pre-exilic times. (The recovery of two silver amulets from a tomb on the edge of the Valley of Hinnom makes a contribution to this point. Scratched on them are lines of Hebrew which seem to include phrases from the 'Priestly Blessing' of Numbers 6:24-26. They show that such texts were known in Jerusalem about 600 B.C. and used in an almost magical way. Of course, they do not reveal anything about the other priestly writings.) What archaeology can do is to demonstrate whether or not Israel could have possessed extensive ritual laws and cultic instructions such as those in the 'Priestly Code' long before the fifth century B.C. Some scholars have already drawn attention to comparable texts found at Bogazköy, the capital of the Hittite Empire in central Turkey, and at Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, on the coast of Syria. Now examples can be added from another site. French excavators working at Meskeneh, ancient Emar on the great westward bend of the Euphrates, have unearthed

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more than one thousand cuneiform tablets. Enemies destroyed the city soon after 1200 B.C., the same time that Ugarit and Bogazköy were sacked. Most of the tablets were written in the half century before that date, so once again we can read documents from the times of Moses. Among them is a ritual for the enthronement of a priestess, a ceremony which lasted eight days. There were processions, vigils, and sacrifices, with the participation of most of the town. All the movements are carefully prescribed at Emar in much the same way as in the Old Testament. The editor of the texts from Emar observed in this text a mixture of urban elements with 'archaic customs inherited from the desert'.

In Emar people accustomed to the traditions of Babylonian city-life lived side by side with those whose background was in the semi-nomadic life of the steppe country. Here, it would seem, is a situation rather like that of Israel in Canaan, a people come from a generation of semi-nomadic life to occupy the Canaanite towns. However, the Israelites were not really a nomadic people when they entered their Promised Land, but rather, according to the Bible, a people issued from Egypt, the centre of an extremely ancient culture with large towns and highly organised religious observances. There is every likelihood, therefore, that the Israelites could have had highly regulated rituals of their own from the start of their national life. They could learn from their neighbours, they did not have to pass through the same stages of growth. Certainly they did not live in desert solitude as Wellhausen wanted to believe. In the context of the late second millennium B.C. the 'Laws of Moses' contain nothing exceptional for that time, and nothing that requires a date so late as the post-exilic era.

Such investigations will be of most interest to specialists, but how can they help us in the study of the Bible or help our faith? Their value deserves to be emphasized. The world of Moses' time, revealed by archaeology, allows what Wellhausen and all who follow him have denied for Israel at that period, the existence of an elaborate religious ritual and calendar. Consequently a part of the Bible regains some of the authority taken from it for so long. When the Bible affirms, 'Moses said to the Israelites' and literary critics allege that no-one penned the words that follow until some seven centuries after the death of Moses, the public at large concludes that the Bible is wrong and is not to be trusted, and so it loses its authority. Today we conclude the opposite, the critics are wrong, their arguments are based on hypotheses that began by being too limited. To understand the literary and religious history of Israel objectively, it is essential to study it in the context of the ancient world. The results of such a study, carried out on a comprehensive scale, will give the opportunity to offer to modern society the authority it lacks, and to present it with arguments based on facts.

Archaeology teaches us to respect the written records of the past. For servants of the Living Word it brings valuable assistance in understanding it better, and a reminder of the human condition: men and their ideas are like grass...but the word of our God lasts for ever.

Alan R. Millard, "How Can Archaeology Contribute to the Study of the Bible?" *Evangel* 9:1 (1991): 9-12.

Bibliography

For further examples and illustrations see the writer's *Treasures from Bible Times*, Lion Publishing (1985) and *Discoveries from the Time of Jesus*, Lion Publishing (1990). For the seal of Berechiah see *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Inter-Varsity Press (1980) 176f, and note that this work is rich in archaeological information and pictures. The siege of Lachish sculptures are widely reproduced, most extensively in D. Ussishkim, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib*, Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology (1982).

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