

The Bible BC

What can archaeology prove?

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Archaeology and problems of interpretation

In the previous pages selected discoveries have been related to the Bible because they illustrate or explain various passages. They can be applied in this way only on the assumption that they and the texts are correctly interpreted. Mistakes can be made over both, as a result of carelessness, of wrong presupposition, or of inadequate information. There is a strong temptation to seize upon a find and force agreement between it and the Bible. All too often there is a gap between the two which cannot be bridged until further discovery brings more of the facts to light. Some examples will serve to emphasize these points.

a. Joshua's Jericho

The first is the case of Jericho's fallen walls. From 1929 to 1936 Professor John Garstang dug into the ruin mound identified as ancient Jericho (Tell es-Sultan). He found a city that had been strongly defended with walls that had been rebuilt over and over again. The latest system he described as a double wall with 7 m between the inner wall and the outer, and with buildings across the top. A violent destruction befell this wall. With evidence from the pottery and the pharaoh's names on Egyptian scarabs, the excavator concluded that the city had been burnt shortly after 1400 BC, attributing the sack to the Israelite army under Joshua.

From 1952 to 1958 further work was done at Jericho, by Dame Kathleen Kenyon. Her results completely upset Garstang's. There are good reasons for accepting the more recent judgment, for archaeological technique had been improved immeasurably in Dr Kenyon's hands, and knowledge of Palestinian pottery has been greatly refined since 1936. The walls Garstang laid bare were successive, not contemporary, built and destroyed many centuries

before the date he assigned to them. Later cities stood on their ruins through the fourteenth century until about 1325 BC, according to Dr Kenyon. Hardly anything of that latest city could be unearthed because Jericho is exposed to winter wind and rain that wash away the mud-brick dust, naturally taking the topmost ruins first. Of a city conquered by Joshua late in the thirteenth century BC no stone remained.

Jericho, then, does not give direct evidence about biblical history. How may Dr Kenyon's results be related to the Joshua story? One solution simply treats the famous story of Joshua 5 as a folk tale inserted to account for the existence of a great ruined city. The story is aetiological; it answers a curious observer's question. Whilst the presence of folk tales or aetiological stories in the Bible may be admitted, the tendency to treat these labels as inevitably stamping the stories as untrue should be resisted. Aetiologies may transmit correct recollections of how this or that came to be. Other students of Jericho look for a different site, because the modern town is not on the old mound, and New Testament Jericho was at a third location. A third argument observes the extent of erosion in earlier levels of the city at earlier phases, so proposing that all the thirteenth-century buildings were washed away. The walls of 1700 BC survive at just one point, and then for one course of footing slabs alone atop the earthen rampart, so violently had they suffered. Dr Kenyon's date for the meagre relic of the latest city is disputable, and has been lowered by other archaeologists. The date relies on the forms of pottery, local ware being allocated to one period of time or another primarily on the occurrence of pottery imported from the Mycenaean cities of the Aegaeon. That pottery, in turn, is dated by its appearance in Egypt in well-defined contexts. Continuing discoveries have weakened some parts of this rather attenuated scheme and so have added this uncertainty to the archaeological side.

The date of Joshua's conquest is another side of the

question. Adding figures given in the Old Testament, Professor Garstang reached the early fourteenth century BC. On archaeological and historical grounds a date after 1250 BC is widely approved now. Interpretation of the biblical numbers is uncertain; whether they should be added together is questionable. If this seems odd, we may note that there are difficulties with figures in other ancient near eastern texts, mostly historical inscriptions whose accuracy is not otherwise impugned.

b. Tirhakah, king of Ethiopia

The second example of problems in interpretation takes us to Hezekiah and Sennacherib again. In 2 Kings 19:9 'Tirhakah king of Ethiopia' is said to have sent his forces against the Assyrians. Standard history books call this a mistake, or argue for two Assyrian campaigns in Palestine, one in 701 BC and another in 688 BC, Tirhakah playing a role in the second. Records of the two episodes are therefore said to have been telescoped by the Hebrew historian. Basic to this reconstruction is the fact of Tirhakah's accession to the throne in 690 BC and an interpretation of Egyptian texts implying that he was only nine years old in 701 BC. For years, the first of these points was the major reason for positing the second invasion; then the matter of Tirhakah's age was introduced with inscriptions published in 1949. Egyptologists quickly realized that the first explanation of the texts was faulty, agreeing that Tirhakah was older, perhaps twenty, in 701 BC, quite old enough to have command of an army. As for the title 'king of Ethiopia', the Hebrew writer has followed the common method of identifying Tirhakah as what he became. Assyrian sources are silent about the later years of Sennacherib's reign. In the present instance interpretations of Egyptian and Hebrew records interlock and it is clear how the erroneous view of one wrongly affected the other.

c. Creation and the flood

Questions about how the world was made fall beyond the

scope of archaeology. What it has done is to produce ancient near eastern stories of creation to set alongside the Hebrew. Several are very different, though a few superficially similar ideas occur in some (e.g. that man is made from soil or dust, for that is what he becomes when his body decays). Only in Babylonia are there stories with sufficient parallels for a strong link with the Hebrew to be suspected. Close examination of the passages reduces even those to a small number, the leading parallels being the ideas that man was made with a divine component and an earthly, that he was made to grow food (although that is hardly an idea that is unique), and that the Deity (plural in Babylonia) rested after man's creation. For the story of the flood the Hebrew and Babylonian stories are much closer; they could almost be called the same story. Their differences lie in the gods and goddesses of the Babylonian story, the order of birds released from the ark, the details of names, the duration of the storm, the reasons which the Noah-figure gave to his fellows for building his ship, and its size and shape. Copies of a Babylonian account of the creation of man and the flood written about 1635 BC are now available (the *Epic of Atrakhasis*), with several different creation stories of earlier and later date, and a later edition of the same flood story (the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tablet 11). How the Babylonian and Hebrew stories are related is not clear. Existence of much older copies does not force the conclusion that the Hebrew version is borrowed from the Babylonian; both could share a more remote ancestor. Stories were passed from one culture to another, but we have no means of determining how, nor what changes might be made, unless we possess both forms. Certainly the flood story has a Mesopotamian background. In Babylonian history it was a major event, breaking the sequence of kings and remembered as something of remote antiquity in later generations. The list of kings before and after the flood shows parallels, too, with Genesis, in the long lives ascribed to the sets of names, up to 969 years in the Hebrew, up to 43,200 in the Babylonian

records. Again, the significance of the similarities cannot be evaluated, and it would be rash to underrate the tradition in either language.

Whether these stories are history, parable, or myth is another question which archaeology cannot attempt to answer. Claims by Sir Leonard Woolley and other archaeologists to have traced silt left by the flood at Ur of the Chaldees and sites further north in Babylonia have not been supported by further research. The literature remains our only source of knowledge for the event.

Different interpretations can produce conflict or harmony between sources, and even where disagreement is thought likely, the limits of our own grasp of the subject or the sense have to be recalled constantly. Advancing knowledge brings better answers to long-standing puzzles, simultaneously opening new areas for research and debate.

Conclusion

Archaeology has yielded far more facts about the biblical world than these pages present, and doubtless its stores are far from exhausted. We have tried to show how various finds relate to the biblical records, and what are the possibilities and the limits of their evidence. Some discoveries complement the Scriptures neatly, some give information which is indirectly related, and the majority paint the background for the biblical story. Often attitudes and customs depicted in the Bible find direct analogies in that ancient world. A few discoveries raise serious problems for interpretation of biblical and archaeological evidence. In these cases advances in understanding may reveal faults in earlier views, or simply ignorance of all the relevant facts. Finally, we affirm that nothing has been found which can be proved to contradict any statement in the Old Testament. Archaeological research is a welcome aid to a richer knowledge of the Bible's message.

Suggestions for further reading

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- Recent discoveries are reported and discussed in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, issued quarterly by the American Schools of Oriental Research, subscription payable to Scholars Press, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, USA, and in *Buried History*, issued quarterly by the Australian Institute of Archaeology, details from 174 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 3000.