

Purpose of Biblical Archaeology: Media Hype, Myths, Models, and Mission

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Abstract

The following paper is one of three lectures given at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the fall of 2008 as part of the Sizemore Lectures. The paper explores the changing nature of biblical archaeology. The discipline has undergone numerous changes due to the increased interest in archaeological finds by the media, the expansion of archaeology into other areas of the ancient Near East, and changing world views among scholars. The article examines and summarizes these changes and draws conclusions about the purpose and use of archaeology for those holding and evangelical Christian worldview.¹

Media Hype

It seems that not a month goes by when we do not hear about some spectacular find that is going to revolutionize what we think about the Bible or Jesus. No matter how small or insignificant the find, the media is able to somehow make it more important than it actually is. This is understandable to a point; the public likes sensation. The Bible is still the most purchased book ever (I used to say “most read book,” but I have tempered my statements to correlate with the evidence). Anytime there is

¹ I would like to honor the Sizemore family and their commitment to providing seminary students with an outlet to discuss current and important trends in biblical studies. They have left a legacy of fidelity to the in-depth study of God’s Word. I would like to thank Dr. Roberts and the faculty of Midwestern Seminary for inviting me to give the Sizemore Lectures this year. I appreciate Dr. Roberts evangelistic zeal, his understanding of the great commission as a historic event and something that followers of Jesus should be actively engaged in. I also appreciate his passion for training men and women to handle God’s word properly. His personal commitment for current archaeological research and his commitment to Midwestern’s participation in the Tel Gezer excavation project goes beyond the duties of most seminary presidents.

some find associated with the Bible, it is going to draw public interest. Hence, the media is quick to report on any find that has some biblical relevance. We are all familiar with the examples from the past five years or so: James Ossuary, Joash Inscription, John the Baptist's Cave, as well as son of the High Priest, palace of David, etc., etc. Not to mention the finds that resurface almost annually: Noah's Ark and the Ark of the Covenant.

Now, archaeologists are not necessarily victims, because they also participate in the media hype. We need funds to support our research; we need the so-called free advertising that media offers—so archaeologists are quick to use the media to promote our work. Sometimes this relationship is abused by archaeologists. The best examples are the Cave of John the Baptist and the Lost Tomb of Jesus.² Each of these finds was promoted with a media circus. It was also convenient that these discoveries were reported just before a book or a documentary was about to come out.

The media's desire to sensationalize finds and the archaeologist's desire to publicize his work creates a marriage of convenience that only supplies fuel to the fire of the sensationalization of artifacts. This creates an environment ripe for several types of individuals to become associated with biblical archaeology: caricatures, charlatans, critical scholars, and criminals/collectors.

Myths

Most public perceptions of an archaeologist follow the Hollywood model of Indiana Jones. He is a studious archaeologist with a dual personality of scholar in the classroom, wearing a tweed coat during the academic semester; and during the academic breaks, he becomes transformed into a whip-carrying swashbuckling hero, who fights evil forces as he heads off on an adventure to find some lost object. It is humorous to those of us in the field of archaeology that whenever amateurs want to portray themselves as serious archaeologists, they portray themselves as a modern-day Indiana Jones. This is true whether they are looking for the lost Ark of the Covenant, Mt. Sinai, Noah's Ark, Paul's shipwreck, the route of the Exodus, or the "real" location of the Tomb of Jesus. The scripts for all these amateur portrayals are very similar. It must work,

² Shimon Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist: The First Archaeological Evidence of the Historical Reality of the Gospel Story* (New York: Doubleday, 2004); Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

because several men have made names for themselves as they take on this persona of the Hollywood adventurer making these phenomenal discoveries.³

The church has also fallen captive to these archaeologists who are making famous discoveries. As stated earlier, the best examples are Noah's Ark, the Ark of the Covenant, Location of Mt. Sinai, and my favorite—chariot wheels in the Gulf of Aqaba. Students and pastors fill up my outlook inbox with grainy pictures of supposed chariot wheels deep in the sea. These websites that display various archaeological reports all have a similar conclusion: They are on an expedition, on the last day they found...[insert find], they need money to go back and get it.

Is all media bad? No! As with any discipline, biblical archaeologists desire to make their research available to non-specialists. The best example of this is the popular publication of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (*BAR*). While some archaeologists would place this publication within the domain of caricatures and charlatans, many see it as a valuable interface between the work of biblical archaeologists and the public. Granted, it is a for-profit publication and as with any publication there is a tendency to sensationalize, but it has served the discipline well.

In addition to caricatures and charlatans, we also have critical scholars. Critical scholars have realized the impact of the media on the public's perception of the historicity of the Bible. *BAR* has demonstrated that there is a public desire to know the results of scholarly research. Therefore, critical scholars have created their own media circus to promote their views. The most prominent is the Jesus Seminar during the early 1990s. This group of scholars got together under the auspices of finding the historical Jesus. Each year they put out media guides and reports of their scholarship. In truth, the Jesus seminar was not searching for the historical Jesus, but reinventing Jesus in *their own image*. These scholars got together and voted on each saying of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. They would hold press conferences and be interviewed by major print publications such as *Time* or *Newsweek* every Christmas and Easter season. The conclusion of their research was that Jesus' words as recorded in the New Testament are not authentic, but were added later by the early church to support their "corrupted" doctrine of a resurrected Lord. When it was all said and done, their research concluded that only

³ For a discussion of this type of distortion see, Steven M. Ortiz "The Use and Abuse of Archaeological Interpretation and the Lost Tomb of Jesus," pp. 1-50, in Charles Quarles (ed.) *Buried Hope or Risen Savior? The Search for the Jesus Tomb* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2008).

about 18% of what we have in the Gospels are actually the words of Jesus.⁴

A similar trend has occurred in Old Testament studies commonly referred to as the minimalist and maximalist debate.⁵ The underlying premise of the minimalist position is that not much of the Hebrew Bible is historical. In the past, even secular, non-conservative scholars held to some degree of historicity of the biblical text. While these scholars discounted the supernatural, they still acknowledged that there was an historical event that was the impetus for the account. Basically there was a David and a Solomon, but the later writers added a layer of so-called God speak that accounted for the miraculous and propaganda. To use a modern term—a layer of spin. A new school of thought is now becoming dominant as scholars are proposing that the Bible is a document created sometime during the Persian or even Hellenistic period—a work of fiction.⁶ Not only are the miraculous accounts considered to be fairy tales but even the underlying historical events are fiction! David and Solomon are figures like King Arthur—national and ethnic myths made up in the minds of mad Jewish priests.

While archaeologists have not adopted this view, there is a movement that questions the standard archaeology of David and Solomon by proposing the Low Chronology which redates the archaeological record by nearly 100 years. Thus all the archaeological evidence for the United Monarchy disappears into the 9th century BC.⁷

I have briefly introduced the main characters in the media drama of biblical archaeology: caricatures, charlatans, and critical scholars. However, there are two more characters: the Criminal and Collector. Beneath the sensationalism of all these finds is the exposure of the relationship between collections (whether public or private) and the illegal excavations that are done to bring artifacts to the black market. A

⁴ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar; *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993).

⁵ For an overview of the history of the debate see Megan Bishop Moore, *Philosophy and Practice in Writing a History of Ancient Israel* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

⁶ Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988); Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written & Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Keith W. Whitlam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁷ For a popular overview of the trends and issues see Amy Dockser Marcus, *A View From Mt. Nebo: How Archaeology is Rewriting the Bible and Reshaping the Middle East* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2000).

second criminal activity is the forging of biblical artifacts. Since there is a public and private demand for artifacts from the biblical world—there will always be the criminal element associated with biblical archaeology. This came to the forefront with the James Ossuary and the current court proceedings of the owner, Oded Golan. While the verdict is still out, we do know that several finds associated with biblical history are fakes, and those that are authentic—are suspect.⁸

Al Mohler was recently asked the question of the use/importance of archaeology. He addressed the same issues I mentioned—media hype and critical scholarship, unfortunately he also downplayed the value. I quote him:

Archaeological findings are of great interest, of course. But the key issue is what kind of authority we invest in archaeology in terms of authenticating or disproving the text of the Bible. Christians err by accepting or investing too much evidentiary authority in archaeological “findings,” whether considered to support or to question the biblical accounts.⁹

Unfortunately the media hype and myth are going to be dominant forces. The question that lies before us is, “What is the purpose of biblical archaeology?” Does it have a place in academia? More specifically, does it have a place in the seminary? According to Dr. Mohler, one easily gets the impression that it has limited value.

Models

I have stated that the popular, public portrayal of biblical archaeologists is as caricatures, charlatans or critical scholars. Real archaeologists and those who are doing the actual scholarship never make it to the public eye—and the few evangelicals in the field have an even harder time having their voice heard. Biblical Archaeology is a young discipline that has only grown exponentially in the past 50 years. There have been many developments during this short period. One of the main developments is that biblical archaeology is no longer a subset of biblical studies. It is its own discipline with its own research goals and strategy. These changes have happened so rapidly that the public has not been informed of the changes. The Mohler critique of biblical archaeology is accurate—

⁸ See Nina Burleigh, *Unholy Business: A True Tale of Faith, Greed and Forgery in the Holy Land*, (2008).

⁹ “What Should We Think About Archaeology and the Bible?” www.AlbertMohler.com, posted: Tuesday, July 8, 2008.

however it is anachronistic. He is critiquing the biblical archaeology of the last generation—the biblical archaeology that has become a caricature in the media.

In this essay I hope to address the changing paradigm of biblical archaeology and its usefulness to biblical studies. First, I will present an overview of the history of biblical archaeology and the nature of the archaeological enterprise in order to define the *Purpose of Biblical Archaeology*. In the following essay I will address the nexus of archaeology and its contribution—but more importantly, its value to biblical studies. Hopefully this will demonstrate the process of archaeology within biblical studies.

The first question that needs to be addressed is, “How did we get to this place?” The second question is “Where should we be?”—or more specifically, “What is the nature of archaeology?”

History of Archaeology and Biblical Studies

There is a growing corpus on the history of biblical archaeology.¹⁰ A recent work focuses specifically on the relationship between biblical archaeology and biblical history—particularly its use among conservative scholars. Davis is the first to address the interplay between field archaeology, theology, and the debates within biblical studies on the use of archaeology. In addition, he sets the parameters of the debate and trends of historical minimalists and accurately addresses the theme of biblical archaeology—the question of the historicity of the Bible. I will use Davis’ analysis and historical framework to discuss the history and development of biblical archaeology.

Early explorers of the Holy Land

The birth of biblical archaeology is tied to the draw of pilgrims to Palestine and western man’s fascination with exploration. With the discovery of the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, biblical scholars were quick to make the connection with the biblical accounts. They were quicker to realize the use of archaeological data to support the historicity of the Bible. The emphasis was on the debate between

¹⁰ Thomas W. Davis, *Shifting Sands: The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); P.R.S. Moorey, *A Century of Biblical Archaeology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); Neil Asher Silberman, *Digging for God and Country: Exploration, Archaeology, and the Secret Struggle for the Holy Land, 1799-1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

conservative and critical approaches within biblical studies. With the birth of archaeology of the ancient Near East, several works already emphasized the impact the archaeological realia has on the historicity of the Bible.¹¹ The emphasis was on texts versus monumental inscriptions. To quote Davis:

Biblical Archaeology remained a part of the biblical, rather than the archaeological, world. The illumination of the Bible provided a rationale, a framework, and an interpretive key for archaeological research. The conservatives used the results of archaeology in an attempt to demonstrate the historical accuracy of the Bible, to support their theological positions.¹²

Monuments confront Critical Scholarship

The emphasis of the use of archaeology for apologetics focused on the historicity of the biblical text. Even though biblical archaeology was a young and developing discipline, biblical scholars were quick to discern the value of archaeology for the defense of the faith—that is, it has great potential for apologetics.

Several scholars at the turn of the century proposed that the monuments and archaeological finds substantiated the truthfulness of Scripture.¹³ The premise of these scholars was that the Bible represents an historical account, or a collection of historical records, that you can compare to other historical records. This was in direct response to the critique of the Bible as European critical scholars adopted source criticism. The premise of critical scholarship was that the Bible is a man-made product of various periods in Israelite history and the development

¹¹ George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, Ltd, 1894). See bibliography and discussion in Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, *The Rediscovery of the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1979)

¹² Davis 2004: 45-46.

¹³ A.H. Sayce, *Monuments Facts and Higher Critical Fancies* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904); Ira M. Price, *The Monuments and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1925); Edwin Cone Bissell, *Biblical Antiquities* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1888); A.H. Sayce, *Fresh Light From the Ancient Monuments* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1890); James Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament: Considered with Reference to Recent Criticism* (London: James Nisbet & Co, 1908). George Adam Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1901).

of the Pentateuch reflects an early nationalistic mythologizing of Israelite origins.

The methodology in these early works of biblical archaeology was a comparative study between the texts of the ancient Near East and the Bible. Even today, within seminary circles, when I tell people I am an archaeologist, they will usually reminisce about their archaeology course when their professor passed around a cuneiform tablet. It is encounters like these that make me realize biblical studies has not caught up to developments in biblical archaeology and biblical archaeology still continues to be considered a sub-discipline of biblical studies. It is still modeled after those early apologetic works. Biblical archaeology has changed as a discipline and the emphasis has shifted from a philological to an historical, and now to an anthropological framework. To summarize this early period: conservative scholars focused on archaeology to support the historicity of the texts and critical scholars turned to form criticism.

Birth of Biblical Archaeology as a Discipline

The development of biblical archaeology as a discipline was fulfilled as Albright masterfully used the science of archaeological excavations to address the questions of textual scholars in biblical studies. The theoretical paradigm of this new discipline was the correlation of the archaeological data (biblical world) with the biblical text. The methodology of archaeology now became stratigraphic analysis and ceramic typology.¹⁴ This was a major watershed in the development of the discipline. Although Albright still saw the foundation of biblical archaeology as philology versus history, his scientific positivistic approach to the archaeological data shifted the relationship between archaeological and textual data. Now instead of comparing biblical and Assyrian cuneiform texts (such as Hezekiah's defense of Jerusalem against Sennacherib and Sennacherib's prism) the equations have shifted to evidences such as the fact that Tell Beit Mirsim Stratum C₂ has a destruction level and this is evidence of Joshua's Conquest, or that Gezer IX contains red-slip burnished wheel burnished pottery therefore this is the stratum of Solomon. This is an important shift, now biblical scholars had to master new and different datasets.

Albright developed his archaeology further into two perspectives: biblical archaeology and Palestinian archaeology (later to be termed

¹⁴ Two brand new methods never before used in biblical studies.

Syro-Palestinian Archaeology in 1938).¹⁵ In his new model biblical archaeology is the process of constructing biblical theory on the realia of archaeology.¹⁶

Albright directly addressed the school of Wellhausen through archaeological data in the publication of *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible*.¹⁷ Because of his critique and positive view of the biblical text and archaeology, Albright was accused of fundamentalism—especially in statements supporting the historicity of the biblical text, such as: “Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition of the Bible as a source of history.”¹⁸ One of Albright’s students, Nelson Glueck, held a more conservative position and is famous for his statement in his book *Rivers in the Desert*: “It may be categorically stated that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference.”¹⁹ In reality, Albright theologically was in the middle of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. While he had a high view of the historicity of the Bible—this was based on the archaeological data and not a theological position of the nature of sacred scripture.

G. Ernest Wright—Biblical Theology Movement

Albright’s integration of archaeology and biblical studies was carried further by his student G. Ernest Wright. Wright’s Biblical Theology Movement made archaeology an integral part of Old Testament theology—using the realia of the archaeological data as the paradigm of Old Testament theology that the basis of God’s revelation is in the events themselves and not the text. This approach was short lived as it received criticism from many theologians.²⁰

Wright’s presuppositions were as follows:

- 1) to take biblical theism and supernaturalism very seriously
- 2) to see the unifying factor as the will and purpose of God, and

¹⁵ Davis 2004:87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷ G. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1932).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁹ Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (New York: Grove Press, 1959); p. 31.

²⁰ For a summary of this critique see, Leo Perdue’s *The Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994).

3) to have a sympathetic, understanding faith for the best biblical scholarship.²¹

4)

Wright's aims of biblical study were:²²

1) to attempt to gain a view of the Bible as a whole

2) to discover the meaning of the Bible against all other systems of faith; and

3) to take a stand pro or contra the essentials of its proclamation.

Wright did not view archaeology as something to verify faith, but as something that could enhance the reliability of faith.²³ Wright wanted to return to the central focus in theology—the divine-human encounter.²⁴ According to Davis' analysis, Wright cautiously distanced himself from apologetical archaeology, keeping his foundation on Albright's positivism that focused on the objectivity of the data. Nevertheless, Wright's program and assumptions placed him on the conservative side of the fundamentalist-modernist debate as he attempted to use the critical methodology and responses to New-Orthodoxy while also having a high view of the historicity of the Bible.

When Wright shifted his focus back to the dirt (in particular to the excavations at Shechem) he realized that the archaeological data does not easily match up to the biblical text. There was not an exact one-to-one correlation between both datasets. Thus one of the sets of data needed to accommodate the other set. Either archaeological data needed to be changed or the biblical text needed to change. In the field of biblical archaeology, the archaeological data naturally became king and the measuring rod to evaluate the biblical data.

The end of the Albright-Wright period saw the use of “the perceived realia of the field data to modify the biblical record.” Davis summarizes this period: “the archaeology was used to correct the biblical record, which was used in turn to interpret the archaeology: a circular trap.”²⁵

Post Albright/Wright-Death of Biblical Archaeology

The heyday of biblical archaeology took off at a gallop. With the establishment of the state of Israel and Israeli schools of archaeology—

²¹ Wright 1946:90-93; Davis 2004:98.

²² *ibid.*

²³ Davis 2004:99.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Davis 2004:121.

archaeology was producing data on a daily basis.²⁶ With the accumulation of this data; the collapse of the Biblical Theology Movement and its positive equation of archaeology and Bible—the pendulum started to swing back to critical scholarship. Archaeologists started to excavate sites of the Conquest and were not finding mass destructions. We could not find Abraham in the archaeological record and we could not find any evidence for Israel in Egypt nor in the Sinai.

The mantle of biblical archaeology in America was assumed by one of Wright's students: William G. Dever. While he was tasked as a student of Wright's to look for Abraham in the archaeological record—he found no evidence. Although his work was instrumental in redating and defining the Early Bronze-Middle Bronze transition and he single-handedly changed Albright's MBI to EBIV. Besides his work on ceramic analysis, he introduced the *new archaeology* into biblical archaeology which emphasized anthropological approaches to the archaeological record. Now the *search for the Bible* in the archaeological record changed to the *search for social processes* in the archaeology of ancient Israel. Dever proclaimed the death of biblical archaeology and proposed the shift to Syro-Palestinian Archaeology (Dever has since tempered his medical pronouncements on the discipline).²⁷

Current Trends

The historicity of the Bible has dominated the discipline of biblical archaeology the last 25 years. Today, we see three trends in the post-Albright/Wright era.

The first trend is how to define biblical archaeology from a conservative perspective. Biblical archaeology, as used by evangelicals, has not changed from the early days of equating text and artifact. Among evangelicals—most use the Albright/Wright model in their use of archaeological and biblical data. For brevity, I will quote Davis' summary:

Biblical Archaeology rested on two fundamental a priori assumptions: that the Bible was historical, and that archaeology

²⁶ For a summary and overview see Raz Kletter, *Just Past: The Making of Israeli Archaeology* (London: Equinox, 2006).

²⁷ W.G. Dever, "Syro-Palestinian and Biblical Archaeology," in D.A. Knight and G.M. Tucker (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: 1985), pp. 31-74; "Biblical Archaeology--Death and Rebirth?" Pp. 706-22 in A. Biran and J. Aviram, (eds.), *Biblical Archaeology Today, 1990. Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, June 1990* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993).

provided an external, objective source of relia. These in turn were dependent on a belief in the Bible as the Word of God and on a nineteenth-century understanding of science as an endeavor that was immutable and unaffected by the presuppositions of the scholar. Archaeology was properly one of the humanities, and as such it was the handmaiden of history. Thus, the endeavor of archaeology in a historical era should be the elucidation of this history and should be geared to answer the questions of *Kulturgeschichte*. The Bible was the historical document of Palestine; therefore, it was the source of the agenda for biblical archaeology. This agenda was historical, biblical, and, in its ultimate extent, apologetical.²⁸

A second trend is the separation of biblical archaeology and biblical studies. Part of this trend is due to Dever's reaction to Wright's Biblical Theology Movement. Nevertheless, this separation would have developed due to a natural outcome of specialization and the growth of the discipline, and the burgeoning data coming from archaeological excavations. Evidence of the theoretical and methodological shift is demonstrated by the separated scholarly societies between ASOR and SBL.²⁹

The third trend is a crisis in biblical historiography. Since the archaeological record does not match up nicely with the biblical text, many scholars began to ask questions and debate how much of the Bible is authentic history. This has led to the development of the minimalist school which states that there is very little history in the biblical text. This school is starting to dominate Bible history. This dominance is mostly due to an "evangelical zeal" of revisionist history found in the postmodern paradigm shift in biblical studies. This zeal has spilled into the public arena with much publicity and popularization of these minimalist trends. These last two trends have come to dominate biblical archeology and have reached the popular arena as scholars are free to address this question: What is really historical? And conclude...not much.

Archaeological Data and Historical Reliability of the Bible

Why have these last two critical trends come to dominate biblical archaeology? At face value it appears that archaeology has provided

²⁸ Davis, pp. 154-55.

²⁹ The American Schools of Oriental Research and the Society of Biblical Research used to meet jointly until a major break in 1997.

more questions or doubt concerning the historicity of the Bible. A lot of the archaeological data does not seem to match up with the text of the Old Testament. A majority of biblical archaeologists question the historical reliability of the biblical text. How have Christians dealt with the situation? There are four approaches.

The first approach is to walk away from the faith. I can't tell you how many archaeologists I have met in my career who tell me that they used to be believers, or had a high view of the historicity of the biblical text. As they study archaeology or advance in their graduate studies, they become disillusioned with the claims of Scripture. If they do not abandon the faith altogether, they are fully down the path of liberalism.

The second approach is to leave archaeology. Since the discipline provides supposed problems for the faith, abandon the discipline. All this has done is created a generation where we have no evangelical voices or expertise in the field of biblical archaeology. As evangelicals have taken a back seat, we have allowed critical scholars to dominate the field. This is hopefully being corrected by the current program at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the new one started at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The third approach is to rearrange archaeological data. Most of this is done by non-archaeologists, or biblical scholars not trained in archaeology. They propose several major chronological shifts in attempts to match up the biblical text with archaeology.

The fourth approach is starting to gain influence as evangelical scholars are reevaluating our, and critical scholars, presuppositions of the biblical text and the archaeological data. We believe that there is no need to abandon the biblical text, nor the archaeological data—the problem is with our methodology and theories.

Misuse of a Model

Previous approaches using biblical archaeology have applied the simple equation: biblical text = archaeological data. Even the Albright paradigm also indirectly used this equation for the methodology of biblical archaeology. Problems arose when this simple equation appeared to create more disjunctures between the text and the archaeological data. I would go one step further and suggest that the result of this equation is a gross caricature of the relationship (see picture 1).



Picture 1. Example of caricature

Christian apologists use the same equation when they use archaeological data. First you isolate an event in the biblical text, then you postulate a specific object that must be found, forcing a simplistic direct one-to-one correspondence. For example, if the event is the biblical flood, then you go find Noah's ark; if the event is the Exodus then you go find Pharaoh's chariot wheels, parting of the Red Sea, or Mt. Sinai. This approach is the result of an incorrect understanding of the revelation of the biblical text and the nature of the archaeological enterprise. Simply stated, you take a reference in the Bible and show that this reference is supported by extra-biblical data (e.g. texts or material culture). Any use of archaeology is solely within a historical framework. Usually most arguments are framed in the equation, quoting a biblical text (e.g. Luke's census during the birth of Jesus) and equating it with a historic text. Apologetic works typically use this approach.³⁰ This simplistic equation does not take into account the nature of the archaeological data nor the nature of God's revelation.

³⁰ John Argubright, *Bible Believer's Archaeology: Historical Evidence That Proves the Bible: Volume I and The Search for Truth: Volume II* (Fairfax: Xulon Press, 2001 and 2003); Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Volume I and II* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1972, 1975); Ralph O. Muncaster, *Can Archaeology Prove the Old Testament?* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers 2000).

Ironically, critical scholars also hold to this distorted view of the relationship between archaeology and the biblical text. I'll briefly illustrate this with the case study of the Israelite Settlement and conquest. Critical scholars read the conquest account of Joshua and assume a Pompeii result in the archaeological record (just like conservative scholars). This Pompeii effect assumes that we should find destroyed cities 'frozen in time' waiting for the archaeologist to come and expose them.³¹ We assume that we should find each city mentioned in Joshua's conquest destroyed in a massive conflagration left undisturbed waiting for the spade of the archaeologist. Since we do not find the "Pompeii effect," scholars conclude that the Bible is not historical. Not recognizing that the biblical text does not state this (e.g. only 3 sites were "burned"), and a destroyed site of the ancient world is not going to look like modern day military campaigns with bombed out buildings, etc.—their assumptions of the historical records of the biblical text are also caricatures.

The problem is not with the biblical text, nor the archaeological data—the problem is with the method and interpretations. Scholars are either adding to the biblical text and making it say what it does not—or they are using the archaeological record to state something that it is not capable of supporting.

Archaeological Enterprise

The main reason for the misuse of archaeology in biblical studies is that biblical scholars do not understand the nature of the archaeological enterprise—What types of questions can archaeology answer and what is the nature of the archaeological data?

Pots, People, Processes

The archaeological enterprise addresses three components of the social sciences (Anthropology, History, and Sociology). Archaeology deals with material culture studies, social processes, and yes, historical events. When I am teaching an introductory archaeology course, I use the rubric of pots, people, and processes. Archaeologists focus on material culture studies. We look at artifacts—the material remnants of society. We study religion—but our data are temples, iconography, tombs, figurines, etc.—not ritual texts that describe human behavior. We also address questions

³¹ Pompeii is a city that was covered up by the effects of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79. This is a unique event that allowed for a well-preserved Roman city.

of the historian. Usually it is only the larger political picture such as kings and kingdoms. Where events such as ‘building a kingdom’ will leave its mark through settlement patterns; or international trade will be evidenced in the distribution of trade items. We can find military campaigns through destructions. Hence, we can discern centralized authority and postulate the kingdoms of David and Solomon through settlement patterns but we cannot find a tribal leader such as Joshua; we might find evidence of Saul’s activities but not the prophet Samuel. The third component deals with social processes. These are usually questions asked by anthropologists and sociologists: development of urbanization or domestication of plants and animals. Questions focus on such processes as ruralization, tribalism, centralization of authority. It is very rare that our questions refer to a single historical event. It is not that archaeologists are not interested in events of history, we just realize that the archaeological data cannot address something this specific.

Nature of Archaeological Data

Archaeology is the science of reconstructing the past (e.g. culture/human behavior) by a systematic study of material culture. The material culture reflects only a small part of society. Archaeological data reflects that small part of material culture that is preserved through time. It represents an even smaller part of the whole based on that part that has been exposed by the archaeologist’s spade. Hence, archaeological data is incomplete—it is fragmentary. Not only is the archaeological record fragmentary, but it has been altered. There is a whole discipline complete with journals addressing formation processes in the archaeological record.³²

Another issue is that the archaeological record is mute (whether we are looking at artifacts or ecofacts). The archaeologists make the interpretations. A key to the interpretation is the relationship between material culture and human behavior. Human culture does not always encode the material record of society. Even if we had the complete archaeological record preserved—it would not provide a complete picture of biblical events.

Does archaeology prove the Bible? No. Does it disprove the Bible? No. Archaeological data is neutral. It is how it is used by scholars, that determines its usefulness to address the question on the historicity of the Bible. It all comes down to whether you take an inductive or deductive approach. If you take an inductive approach you will naturally disprove

³² See Michael Schiffer, *Formation Processes in the Archaeological Record* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

the Bible. If you take a deductive approach—you can demonstrate that the Bible is historical. The nature of the archaeological record and inquiry demands that we must take a deductive approach.

Mission

The question poised in this essay is what is the purpose of biblical archaeology? Archaeology is a science that reconstructs the past. It participates with the historian in documenting historical events. This should be a neutral enterprise based on the discipline of archaeology and other social sciences.

Does archaeology serve a purpose for biblical study. Yes. Can it be used for apologetics. Yes. The past decade has seen a renewed interest in the historicity of the Bible with events and recent publications. *The DaVinci Code*, *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, and recent scholarship such as the *Jesus Seminar* and *The Bible Unearthed*. These recent publications are attempting to reinterpret Jesus and the Bible—unearthing the real history because it has been distorted by the church and fundamentalists. Unfortunately biblical scholars do not understand the nature of archaeology.

Should archaeology be used for the presentation of the Gospel? Yes. It is a sad state when the first century Christians were going out to the market place and telling people about an empty tomb and a resurrected Lord and we are walking around the market place on the defense saying “that is not the tomb.” The focus has shifted from the resurrection of Jesus to the Tomb of Talpiot. We need a new generation of students who know God’s word and go out and preach the resurrection as a historical event and not a theological statement. The early disciples preached a God who acted in History, within a space time continuum. In fact, the first sermon recorded in the book of Acts after the resurrection of our Lord used the template of God acting in history, and archaeological data! Peter’s Pentecost sermon unfolded the events of Israelite history, as well as the events of his day. The emphasis was on the mighty acts of God and not the feelings of his audience. Peter did not do an internet search on the recent Pew research or go to Lifeway to see the latest research poll. Peter did not go and make philosophical or theological arguments. His data were the events of the Old Testament, and the events of the past two months—the passion of our Lord. God acted in history to fulfill His plan of salvation. The early believers went out and preached—A living God who is sovereign, acting in history. When all is said and done—chariot wheels in the Red Sea must take a back seat to the preaching of the cross. The purpose of archaeology is to reconstruct the past, this is

what I do as an archaeologist. My purpose as an evangelical is to preach the cross.