

## **Sermon 8: The Bible: Part Five: Archaeology and the Bible**

### **OUTLINE**

Archaeology and the OT

Archaeology and the NT

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the 1800s when the budding science of Archaeology was burgeoning, various bold and confident claims were made about the past which contradicted the historical credibility of the Bible. The OT in particular has been constantly reconstructed to be myth and after the fact reporting. The insistence on approaching the Bible with an anti-supernatural bias has led many to try and debunk the prophetic and miraculous elements using late date theories and accusing the Ancients of a primitive mind-set claiming every natural thing they could not understand was supernatural. The constant underestimation of the Ancients and their culture included the denial that writing and complex legal codes could have existed in the time that Moses is that to have lived, 1400BC, and so a later date is given to all those writings traditionally attributed to Moses, and Mosaic authorship denied. Add to this the way in which the new theory of evolution was impacting all the other sciences. In the area of archaeology the theory went that all cultures moved from simplistic polytheistic notions to advanced monotheistic ones. Therefore any parts of the OT that teach monotheism are automatically aged and accused of being written later and given an appearance of being written earlier. The various accounts are no longer credible historical accounts by eye witnesses, but dishonest fabrications at the hands of editors with a particular agenda.

Today we face a problem. Many of these early theories have been disproven, but the damage to the Bible's credibility has already been done. Endless amounts of people who reject the Bible have accepted these outdated and disproved opinions, and they are regularly repeated. My task today is to show that Archaeology does not in fact disprove the Bible but acts to reinforce that the Bible is in fact what it appears to be, eye witness accounts of various historical events. Now as we being we have to stop and recognise the limits of archaeology. I want you to imagine a scenario 3000 years from now when archaeologists find the rubbish dump of Timaru, what sort of a picture of our lives today will they be able to paint. By that time all paper will have rotted, all the iron will have rusted away, perhaps the plastics and the rubber will still be around. All the computer hard drives will be useless, the CDs perished, USBs broken, etc. How far can I go in proving that you as a single individual existed from that rubbish dump? How much about the daily life of my life today can they glean from that dump? How concrete do you think should be their conclusions about my existence and the affairs of my daily life? Given the amount of info we can access on daily life today, the amount of things written down and recorded and copied in some way, we would have a fairly large amount of confidence, but the further back you go, the less confidence you can have. If you want to see the real limits of our ability to know the past try and trace out you family tree, how far back can you go? Using the whole internet with the modern technology of scanning and the ability to access endless amounts of documents, very few of us would be able to go back further than 500 years. I say all of this to impress upon us all the humility that archaeology ought to have. And the limits of what it can confidently assert. If we see the life of the Ancients as a 1000 piece puzzle, how many pieces of that puzzle can we reconstruct by what Archaeology is able to uncover? Less than one whole piece!

As we go about seeking to show how Archaeology supports the Bible, we are not going to try and use it to prove that the person of Abraham or Moses existed by finding some document that has their name on it. No, instead the way in which Archaeology supports the Bible is by affirming how the various names, dates and places are independently confirmed to have existed, and how the various accounts are not fabrications by people who lived hundreds of years later but could only have been written by contemporary eye witnesses. This line of argumentation is not put forward as invincible proof but rather as a response to the nonsensical criticism the Bible has received and to show that it is reasonable to accept that it is in fact what it appears to be.

## **Archaeology and the OT**

Let me begin with a real example of what people think the Bible to be, Mormonism. The Book of Mormon claims to be the history of 2 ancient civilizations. They claim that there was a group called the Jaredites who left the Tower of Babel and went to West, but their civilizations were destroyed due to apostasy. The other civilization is a group of Jews who left Israel in 600BC to go to America before Babylon invaded Israel. They claim that they went east across the Pacific ocean and landed on the western shore of South America. The book of Mormon is essentially a condensed history of the high points of this civilization. The author of the history was a prophet named Mormon. Dave Hunt writes this about the Book of Mormon: 'No evidence has ever been found to support the Book of Mormon...in spite of decades of the most aggressive archaeological exploration throughout North, Central and South America. This Herculean effort, supported by the vast wealth and determination of the Mormon Church, has left no stone unturned in the search for verification of the Book of Mormon, but has come up empty handed. Not one piece of evidence has ever been found to support the Book of Mormon—not a trace of the large cities it names, no ruins, coins, no letters, or documents or monuments, nothing in writing. Not even one of the rivers or mountains or any of the topography it mentions is ever identified!... The Book of Mormon provides one excellent example of the impossibility of fabricating a make believe scenario and then trying to convince the world that it really happened.'<sup>1</sup>

Compare this fabrication with what Millar Burrows from Yale says about the bible, 'The Bible is supported by archaeological evidence again and again. On the whole, there can be no question that the results of excavation have increased the respect of scholars for the Bible as a collection of historical documents. The confirmation is both general and specific the fact that the Bible can be so often explained or illustrated by archaeological data shows that it fits into the framework of history as only a genuine product of ancient life could do. In addition, to this general authentication, however, we find the record verified repeatedly at specific points. Names of places and persons turn up at the right places and in the right periods.'<sup>2</sup>

It was commonly believed that there would have been no writing at the time Moses lived 1400BC. This was the common theory which forced scholars to push for a later date. One of the key discoveries that overturned this theory was the discovery of the Ebla tablets. These tablets come from a civilization that predates Moses by a thousand years and shows a sophisticated society that included writing. These tablets were uncovered in the 1960s, many years after many of the Higher Critical theories had been popularised. Several important things came to light. Firstly, the idea of creation out of nothing by a single being,

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1 Quoted in Does God Believe in Atheists, p403-404.

2 Quoted in Evidence that Demands a Verdict, p371.

i.e. monotheism and creation ex nihilo, two biblical teachings. The import of this is that these were thought to be later developments as the thought of the ancient people became more sophisticated. This toppled the evolutionary theory of the development of religion. Secondly, the notion that writing and case law was a later development is overturned. Liberal scholars have attempted to say that the case law of Deuteronomy is as much as 800 years later than Moses, but in the Ebla tablets we see very similar laws 1000 years before Moses. Thirdly, the tablets also mention various Biblical names such as Ur, Sodom and Gomorrah, Baal. Another contribution is the account of Abraham rescuing Lot, several of the kings mentioned in Genesis 14 were thought to be fantasy, but the Ebla tablets speak of them. The tablets list the 5 cities of the plain as does the Bible, and even in the exact same order. Please appreciate that it was only in the late 1960s that Archaeology was able to confirm what the Bible has been saying for thousands of years.

The Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is confirmed in several ways. Firstly, the various descriptions of desert living and the places in the desert have been confirmed. Secondly, the Egyptian background in geography, various words used, and how the Pharaoh is named all point to the traditional timing of Moses writing, a reveal an insider's experience of Egyptian life. Archaic spellings and words and phrases which no longer be in use by 1400BC but which in use during the time of the Patriarchs likewise reveal first-hand information about the events recorded.

Whether it is the fact that the walls of Jericho fell as the Bible describes it, that a sling was common tool in warfare in the time of Saul, that David in the 1990s was confirmed to have existed, how he took Jerusalem from the Jebusites, that Solomon's temple did exist, that Cyrus issued an edict for the Jews to return to Israel, etc. Archaeology has confirmed over and over again various details of the Bible upholding its value as a credible historical source of information. Many of these events were judged by liberal critics to be made up or simply impossible, yet Archaeology has confirmed them. Many of the fanciful theories of the Liberals against the Bible have been overthrown by more careful study. For the Old Testament we have Robert Dick Wilson, he set out a regime of study for himself unmatched in scholarly circles. He spent 15 years doing language studies in the languages of the ancient middle east, becoming familiar with 26 languages, of course including the 3 languages of the Bible. 15 years studying the text of the OT, and 15 years publishing his findings. What did he discover? Well in the face of the claims that the OT was mythology not fact, that all the dates of the books were written many years after the events they record, and that it was riddled with historical inaccuracy. Wilson overturned the theories of biblical criticism. He discovered in the ancient languages facts of names and places of people who the critics claimed did not exist. The critics had never learnt more than 3 languages, and had not explored the sources in other languages which verify the existence of Abraham, various kings mentioned in the book of Genesis, the existence of the Hittites thought to be fantasy, the city of Ur, and many other facts.

### **Archaeology and the NT**

Grand claims of the inaccuracy of the NT and how it was the product of after the fact editors have also been overthrown. Have you ever heard of Sir William Ramsay? He is known as one of the world's greatest archaeologists, he was Professor of classical art and architecture at Oxford university, Regius Professor of humanity at Aberdeen university, the holder of nine honorary doctorates, and finally knighted for his distinguished contribution to the world of scholarship. While a student Ramsay had believed all that Wellhausen a leading German critic had said about the Bible. That they were not written by eye witnesses but rather long after the facts and were full of inaccuracies. Ramsay set off to Asia to the various places

mentioned in Acts to put the final nails into the coffin of the NT. What he discovered made him reel, for as he scratched through the historical records the absolute accuracy of Luke's accounts amazed him to the extent that he said, 'Further study... showed that the book [Acts] could bear the most minute scrutiny as an authority for the Aegean world, and that it was written with such judgement, skill, art and perception of truth as to be a model of historical statement'. (Blanchard, p401). Ramsay proved Luke to be an eye witness to the events of the Bible and to have recorded the events with better accuracy than any other ancient source. He was called a first class historian.

Take Paul's journey to Rome in Acts 27:1-28:10, there are three aspects of it that archaeology has confirmed. Firstly, we need to note that as we watch the ship on it's voyage, we are reading the most detailed working of a ship in all of ancient literature. James Smith a keen yachtsman, geographer, and member of the royal society who had lived in Gibraltar, and Malta made a study of Paul's voyage and shipwreck, and published a book remarking on the accuracy of the descriptions of ports, weather patterns, and the workings of the ship. Secondly, we see once again Luke's accuracy in the case of the titles of the various rulers in the different parts of the ancient world. He knew it was proconsuls in Corinth and Cyprus, Asiarchs in Ephesus, Politarchs in Thessalonica, Herod Antipas was a Tetrarch, and the ruler of Malta was a protos/first man. The ability to get this right would be equal to an undergraduate at Oxford knowing about the Provost of Oriel, the Master of Balliol, the Rector of Exeter, and the President of Magdalen. This further verifies Luke's eye witness status and careful scholarship. Thirdly, Luke makes mention of the chief man's father in law being sick, he was suffering from fever and dysentery. It turns out that Malta was well known for Malta Fever, and in 1887 it was discovered that it came from a bacterium in the milk of the goats on Malta. The Bible is a reliable book that has stood the test of time, it is the truth and can be trusted.

John's Gospel in particular has come under a lot of fire and is accused of being written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by a stranger to Jerusalem. John 5:2 records the Pool of Bethesda which means house of mercy, 'Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.' For many years it was thought that John had made this up but archaeology has revealed just how accurate John was. The pool was uncovered in 1964. One of the difficulties adding to this is the way in which scribes in copying the manuscripts have changed the spelling of the pool pointing to various other possible pools at the time. You will remember that standardised spelling is a modern phenomenon. Another difficulty is the fact that there are no pools with five colonnades around it. This was cleared up with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls which indicated the presence of a double pool. Today these are known as the pools of St Anne. There were two pools side by side, surrounded on all four sides with colonnades, and with a fifth colonnade running between the two pools. Before digs revealed the structure of the pool it was thought that John was using the 5 colonnades in symbolic fashion to refer to the 5 books of Moses. The scroll is part of the Qumran scrolls and the group that these scrolls belonged to were destroyed in Jewish revolt in 70AD. This means that John has a contemporary reference that confirms his identification of the pools.

We could go on demonstrating how the Bible is confirmed to be what we have always known it to be. We do not finally accept the bible to be true because the great and inerrant and omniscient science of archaeology has proven it to be so. No, archaeology is extremely limited in what it can prove. There are still many apparent problems between the bible and archaeology. We do not wait to see if someone can dig up something out of every ancient rubbish dump to confirm the Bible to be true. We know the Bible to be the word of God by other means. However it is always encouraging to have the truthfulness of the Bible's

history affirmed and for this we can be grateful. In all of this I would like to encourage you to not be intimidated by the so called conclusions of archaeology, like any of the sciences it is not inerrant, it is dependent on the men and women and the assumptions they bring to their tasks, it is not neutral. Let me end with this: 'At the end of 1974, TIME magazine ran an article entitled 'How true is the Bible?', which discussed the condition of the Bible after 200 years of critical attack. The article came to this conclusion: 'the breadth, sophistication and diversity of all this biblical investigation are impressive, but it begs a question: Has it made the Bible more credible or less? ... After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps better for the siege. Even on the critics own terms—historical fact—the Scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Does God Believe in Atheists, p404.