

HOW BIBLICAL IS BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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For many Jews and Christians who hold fast to the Bible as the chief, if not the only repository or channel of divine revelation, Biblical archaeology is a potential ally, for it “proves the Bible true”. For the great public, who today at least have little first-hand knowledge of the Bible and, at most, think of it as a collection of interesting, if somewhat dated, morality stories and useful apophthegms, Biblical archaeology serves merely to add confirmation—and perhaps some colour—to the traditional Western view of history and the Judaeo-Christian ethic. To other branches of archaeology, largely defined on a geographic or cultural basis (the archaeology of Central America, China, Egypt or Greece), Biblical archaeology is suspect as a form of special pleading. In fact, Biblical archaeology has become so pejorative a term among archaeologists, generally, that there is a strong tendency for Biblical archaeologists to call themselves Palestinian archaeologists.

Yet neither the traditionalists nor the archaeologists of other breeds are justified in their hopes or fears. Biblical archaeology is broader in its scope than Palestinian archaeology and, at least by definition, should have a valid and very important role.

As a branch of archaeology it supplements or complements the written record of the past by its study of the human artifacts—whether they be tools or buildings—which have survived from antiquity, often beneath the surface of the earth. The adjective “Biblical” defines its purpose and scope: to illustrate and document the Bible. To be sure, as much of Bible history—both that of the Old Testament and the New—was enacted in Palestine, Biblical archaeology is largely Palestinian archaeology. But it transcends these geographical boundaries. The Old Testament knows that Abraham came from Ur and that the Children of Israel descended into Egypt. The New Testament knows that Paul’s travels extended far beyond the boundaries of Palestine. Biblical archaeology, therefore, must encompass the archaeology of much of the Near East and the Mediterranean world. One might think that, while its geographic boundaries could thus be extended to impinge on territories of more specialized archaeological disciplines, it would at least be restricted chronologically, i.e., it would probably not

extend backwards in time before the beginning of the second millennium B.C. and forward beyond the first century A.D. This is, in fact, the case but no absolute line can be drawn. Can we understand the cultural background of the Patriarchs if we know nothing of the civilization of Mesopotamia before 2000 B.C.? Can we really understand the Pauline journeys without some knowledge of the development of the Christian church in Asia Minor, Greece, Italy and Egypt in the two or three centuries after his death?

The Biblical archaeologist must therefore spread himself over a broad area, comprising more than one culture, and over some three thousand years of history at least. Whatever his field of specialization, whatever his personal interest, his profession can be accounted Biblical, if the elucidation of the Bible remains as the focal point of all his research. Such an approach is defensible and needs no apology; in fact, it is no more tendentious than other branches of archaeology which are organized on cultural rather than strictly geographic or historical lines. The prehistoric archaeologist no longer confines himself to early Europe. He is vitally interested in the discoveries being made in South Africa, in Iran, in Indonesia, or China. If the new finds of early man in these areas are relevant—and they are—the prehistoric archaeologist must know them all and bring them within his synthesis. The mediaevalist also—both historian and archaeologist—must be as interested in what was happening in the Middle Ages in Turkey and the Near East as he is in what was happening in Western Europe.

If the term "Biblical", then, merely indicates the terms of reference, the central concern around which the research of the Biblical archaeologist revolves, it is necessary to define more closely what "Biblical" means.

The Bible is many things. It is a book of history, reflecting both an earlier stage of oral transmission and the later sophisticated, self-conscious recording of events selected on the basis of an accepted philosophy of history. It is a book of religious thought, embodying a substratum of early belief and practice shared with neighbouring peoples, the sometimes revolutionary statements of its prophets, and the logical and dogmatic assertions of a fully developed theology. It is a book of ethics which by folk-saying, story, proverb and specific code propounds and defends a standard of acceptable conduct. It is a literary work, containing prose and poetry of a very high order.

If the Bible is so many things, what does "proving it true" mean? It is difficult to see how "true" in this phrase can mean anything more or less than what it normally signifies, i.e., accurate, trustworthy, conformable to fact. What can it mean when applied to Biblical literary excellence or ethics? Must one demonstrate

that Hebrew poetry was superior to Canaanite or Egyptian poetry or that Biblical ethical norms were, and remain, universally valid? It is difficult to see how anyone could discover objective standards by which to defend such claims and surely the archaeologist would not take upon himself this responsibility.

For the Biblical archaeologist, however, the crux of the problem lies in the area of history and theology. Both Judaism and Christianity are historical religions, that is, they claim that the existence of God, his nature and his activity, are evidenced in history—and not only in nature. As a result, history and theology are inextricably mixed and the scholar or layman who desires to prove the Bible “true” must not only demonstrate that the events recorded are conformable with the events known from other sources (including archaeology) but also that the Biblical philosophy of history, which has selected and interpreted these events but discarded or disregarded other events, was right in so doing. In other words, it is not merely the historicity of the Bible which must be demonstrated; it is the credibility and reliability of the Bible’s interpretation of a selected set of crucial events.

As its historic event par excellence Judaism selected the Exodus—for it was the clear demonstration that God had chosen Israel as his peculiar people. Christianity chose the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, for in this series of events God made himself known to man in a new revelation which superseded all others and provided a new way to salvation. To prove the Bible true, it would be necessary not only to demonstrate that the Exodus and the Passion events actually occurred, and that they conformed in every respect with the accounts given in the Bible; it would also be necessary to show that the significance read into these events was evident beyond all cavil and that the events were incapable of any other interpretation.

Archaeology is a historical discipline in the broadest sense. It can, and does, discover and document political events; it also—and probably more importantly—provides the data of social history, the physical, economic and cultural factors which normally give rise to and shape the political events. Biblical archaeology, therefore, can provide a setting for events which are recorded in the Bible and sometimes explain why these events occurred as they did. In this way, the often succinct narrative of the Bible can be fleshed out. But can it, as a historical discipline, go beyond this? The writer of history has, ever since the beginning, laboured under a burden placed on his shoulders by his own society—the demand that his narrative of events prove something—that, in a word, it be propaganda. In a day when historians are striving to throw off this weight of dogma—the advancement of national, racial or economic theories and claims—can the Biblical archaeologist take

up the dead burden? Can he go further than the honest but tentative recounting of events and situations as he has documented them, and attempt to prove that certain of these events are imbued with a special quality of uniqueness? Can he move from simple *Geschichte* to *Heilsgeschichte*? The answer must be "No". The archaeologist—even the Biblical archaeologist—is bound by the standards and ideals of his discipline to reject the demand—and perhaps, in some cases, the temptation.

What, then, is a Biblical archaeologist? How does he differ from a Palestinian archaeologist? The difference subsists, largely, in the archaeologist's point of view. It is a cliché, but still true, that Western civilization derives in large part from three ancient centres of learning, power and faith—Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. The study of the Western heritage must, in some way, focus its attention on these three while going beyond them to discover the sources of the special qualities and attitudes which characterized them. The Biblical archaeologist attempts to learn more about one of these—that one which is summed up in the word Jerusalem. So far, he could be a Palestinian archaeologist. But it is the further step, the attempt to relate this rather narrow field of research to a broader cultural past and to see its ramifications for an evolving cultural pattern—which we may call Western—which carries the Biblical archaeologist beyond the specialist in the Palestinian field. It is not his primary task to show that the events recorded in the Bible occurred in exactly that form. It is even less his responsibility to "prove" that those events have some eternal and universal significance. It must be his concern to try to understand the cultural milieu in which the Bible arose, the factors which influenced the choice of events considered to be of crucial importance, the effects that such selection had on subsequent history, and—finally—the role that this pattern of thought and conduct played in the genesis and development of a new pattern which we call Western civilization.

The Biblical archaeologist can never be, simply, a dirt archaeologist—the discoverer of ancient artifacts—whose task ends with the publication of these shards of the past and the comparison of them with similar debris from other sites. Ideally, he must go beyond this to interpret them first within their own cultural context and finally within a larger context of human history. He must at all times retain modesty and humility, admitting the shortcomings of the evidence at his disposal and the human equation in his interpretation. He must be tentative, slow to judge the motives of others and quick to judge his own. He must, in a word, be a true scientist and have those qualities of mind and spirit which are inculcated by the Bible. In this sense, at least, he deserves the name of Biblical archaeologist.