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ARCHAEOLOGY and the RELIABILITY of the OLD TESTAMENT

The topic of the historical reliability of the Old Testament (OT) raises two kinds of questions. The first is whether the OT documents have been accurately preserved. Do they represent what their original authors wrote and intended to say? Or, has the OT message somehow been lost in the centuries-long shuffle of copying and re-copying the biblical manuscripts? The second question is whether as modern readers we can rely fully on the historical accuracy of the biblical writings.



Examples of ancient inscriptions.

The concern for the meaning and accuracy of OT (Hebrew) manuscripts is the task of Biblical Philology, including the related studies of Textual Criticism and the archaeology of ancient Semitic inscriptions. Tasks such as these can be carried out only by highly trained specialists in the Semitic languages of the Bible. The results of such study are indispensable not only for the lay person's confidence in the reliability of the OT, but also for the scholar's defense of that reliability. Much of this work must, understandably, be carried out behind the scenes, unnoticed by lay readers, but under the careful scrutiny of colleagues, evangelical or otherwise. What is at stake in this type of work is nothing less than the historical and scientific grounds for the claim of all Christians that the Bible is a faithful and reliable witness to its original texts and the historical events they record.

Philologists help us lay the foundations for that claim by demonstrating that the Bible we hold in our hands today is the same Bible penned centuries before the birth of Christ. Though such tasks may appear to be dry and arcane, it is helpful to bear in mind that some of our most popular English writers, such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, were themselves philologists by profession. What Lewis and Tolkien did for the study of Old English literature, biblical philologists do for the Hebrew manuscripts of the OT. Philology enables us to determine the age of biblical manuscripts and the language in which they are written. It also helps us understand the relationship between biblical Hebrew as a language and the languages of the ancient Near East. By comparing the biblical texts to ancient documents from the biblical era one learns much about the integrity of the biblical manu-

scripts and their reliability as witnesses to ancient historical events. Thanks to the contribution of philology to biblical studies, we can confidently say that the biblical Hebrew manuscripts that lie behind our modern English translations give every appearance of being historically linked to authentic ancient Semitic documents from the earliest periods of biblical history.

In 1929, archaeologists uncovered a remarkable cache of clay tablets near the modern region of Ras Shamra, the ancient city of Ugarit, on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. These texts date from the biblical period of the Judges. Some of these tablets were found still lying in the ovens where they had been baking at the time the city of Ugarit was destroyed more than 3000 years ago. Of importance to the philologist is the fact that these tablets were written in an ancient Semitic dialect

directly related to the language of the Bible. Today that language is called Hebrew. An important outcome of this discovery is the evidence it provides for the age and nature of the language of the Bible. It is not a new language, nor is it a language unknown at the time the Bible was written. When the biblical manuscripts are compared with these early Ugaritic tablets, it is evident that the biblical texts have preserved a very ancient form of the language of that period. This is especially true of the poetic texts. They are not rewritten or modernized versions of the language of earlier texts. They bear all the earmarks of the actual language of the Canaanites during the biblical period. It would have been impossible to imitate or artificially stage the kind of close identity that exists between the language of the OT and that of the early Canaanites of the OT period.

One of the most far reaching archaeological finds of the last half century has been the discovery of what have become known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls are the remains of an ancient library of manuscripts stashed away in caves more than 2000 years ago. Of primary interest is the wealth of biblical manuscripts found among these scrolls, most of them dating from the first and second centuries B.C. Much has been written about this discovery and much more remains to be written. Needless to say, they cast a great deal of light on the history of the biblical manuscripts. In these texts we have actual manuscripts and parts of manuscripts of the Bible that go back to only a few short centuries from the time of the final composition of many of the books of the Bible. The similarity between these ancient manuscripts and our more recent Hebrew texts shows that the scribes who copied and handled them were as cautious and exacting as modern biblical scholars.

The second question we have raised above regarding archaeology's contribution to the reliability of the OT is whether the historical events recounted in the OT actually happened as they are recounted. Did the biblical authors get it right when they wrote these histories? Here we must lay aside our philological tools and become historians. That means we are faced with the task of recon-

structing the events recorded in the Bible and attempting to identify them with known historical events from the ancient Near East. Such comparisons of the OT with ancient history make it possible to measure how close the biblical writers' accounts were to the modern historians' understanding of what "actually happened."

In attempting to get a fix on both biblical and secular historical events, archaeology is of prime importance. After nearly a century of serious digging, biblical archaeologists have reached a broad consensus on how the bits and pieces of the historical puzzle should fit together. In viewing the total picture, the pieces supplied by modern archaeologists fit remarkably well with the picture supplied by the biblical narratives. It is, thus, widely acknowledged that, on balance, the events recorded in the OT Scriptures should not only be taken as historical in the true sense of the term, that is, they actually happened, but also

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they should be considered as a close, if not exact, replica of the actual events of the ancient world.

Such knowledge of the history of Israel, both in and apart from the Bible, is essential for demonstrating the truthfulness of the biblical account. When we claim the Bible is true, we take that to mean it is historically factual and accurate. But how can we know it is historically accurate without knowing something of the events it is describing? How do we know that biblical history conforms to the events of ancient history unless we know what those events were and how they happened? Before the rise of modern historiography, readers of the Bible were more or less obliged to take the reliability of the Bible at face value. Scriptural reliability and accuracy was a matter of trust in the biblical writers. If the Bible appeared to be making a claim to be historically accurate, being the Word of God, it warranted the reader's trust that it would make such claims with moral integrity. Since Moses wrote the Pentateuch and Moses was a man of integrity, one needn't worry about the

accuracy of his work because he could be trusted to tell the truth.

The situation today is quite different. Few today would venture the argument that the OT is historically reliable merely because its authors were morally upright. As important as such an issue may be, it cannot be allowed a central role in biblical apologetics. In today's world, it is expected that biblical truth, in so far as that means historical reliability, must pass through the same fiery trials as other documents claiming to be historical. That means the Bible must often fend for itself in the arena of secular history, and in the face of an historical skepticism that places in doubt not only the central tenets of biblical history, but also any kind of history that involves a faith commitment up front.

The question raised by such a "minimalist" position is how to account for such a sudden change of attitude about not only the Bible's historical reliability but also the reliability of nearly every

kind of historical account. Has there been a fundamental change in the field of biblical archaeology? Has there been a surge of new archaeological discover-

ies which have turned biblical proofs into doubts about the Bible? What has been the source of such negative attacks on both the Bible and history in general? While it may be true that times have changed and new sorts of questions must be asked and answered about the Bible, it is also true that this new attitude about history and the Bible has arisen not out of new evidence about past events, but rather out of deep seated problems that have beset historical research in general. It is in response to such changes in historical method that I want to make the following four observations.

1. The increasingly negative tone of some historians and archaeologists is *not* the result of new findings or new discoveries at the ancient biblical sites. The fact is that recent discoveries unearthed by archaeologists have continued to produce historical evidence in support of the Bible. In 1993, for example, at the height of the new negativity within scholarly circles, an inscription was unearthed from the 9th Century B.C. which mentions the name of David, the first king of

the Southern Kingdom. At the same time the new archaeologists were presuming the stories of David to be fiction, this inscription established that David was a real historical figure.

2. The increasingly negative tone of some historians and archaeologists is *also not* the result of showing that past discoveries of archaeologists were in error. Much of the work of past archaeologists which substantiated the biblical history still stands—in most cases more than ever before. The difference lies in how these earlier discoveries are now interpreted. An example of this comes from one of the most dramatic pieces of historical evidence yet to be uncovered by Egyptologists. It was discovered over a century ago. It is the 13th Century B.C. inscription of the Egyptian king Merneptah which mentions a people called “Israel” along with biblical place names such as Canaan and Ashkelon. There could not be a stronger proof of the accuracy of the Bible than this inscription. Here in one of the king’s own inscriptions, we have the mention of the people “Israel” by an Egyptian king hundreds of years before modern “minimalist” archaeologists believe there was an Israel.

3. The increasingly negative tone of some historians is the result of a fundamental shift in the way biblical history is conducted. Put simply, according to the biblical “minimalists,” the biblical record cannot and should not play a role in reconstructing biblical history. It is, of course, valuable to view ancient history without an undue emphasis on the Bible. There are many persons and events in the ancient world not mentioned in the Bible. The problem, however, is that after these archaeologists have reconstructed the biblical history without the biblical text, they go on to accuse the Bible of getting it wrong because it does not conform to their newly reconstructed version of that history. The fact is, the only other written history of ancient Israel ever available comes from the Bible. They, thus, judge the biblical version against their own version of its history. One would think the Bible should at least be allowed to speak on its behalf and give its own version of the events it records. Both versions, the biblical one and the secular one, should be evaluated against the available evidence.

To give one example, the archaeological starting point of the history of

the dynasty of David and Solomon has always been the remains of monumental structures from the 10th Century B.C. These structures were dated to this period because it was assumed they were related to the kingdoms of David and Solomon, which the Bible credits with the origin of the monarchy. Without the biblical picture by which to evaluate the archaeological remains, these monumental structures could also be dated to the 9th Century and hence, to the time after David and Solomon. With such a view of the evidence, it would appear that the actual origins of the great Israelite monarchy came after the time of David and Solomon. The Bible thus appears to be a hundred years off target. But, it is only by discounting the biblical record in the first place that these historians are able to conclude the Bible has mixed up its dates. If the Bible is allowed to speak for itself, it conforms without a hitch to the existing archaeological evidence.

4. The last observation is complex, but it lies at the heart of the debate over history and the Bible. What the new historians and archaeologists are often saying is that their evidence sometimes contradicts what earlier archaeologists said about the Bible. Put this way, it is not a question of the historical reliability of the Bible as much as it is a question of the historical reliability of the work of earlier archaeologists. The question is not so much whether the Bible is true as it is whether the dominant theories of great biblical archaeologists were true. What often goes unsaid in these debates is that sometimes, in order to get their facts to fit the Bible, earlier archaeologists (such as William F. Albright) made assumptions about biblical history that contradicted the Bible itself. The negative work of the new archaeologists therefore can lend valuable support to biblical history by undermining previous false assumptions about that history.

The past generation of archaeologists, under the leadership of Albright, for example, unanimously assumed that Israel’s exodus from Egypt occurred during the time of the 19th Dynasty in Egypt under the reign of Ramesis II. Based on that chronology, earlier historians and archaeologists assumed the Bible to be in error when it recorded the destruction of the city of Jericho by the Israelites. Jericho, they argued, was destroyed more than a century *before* the Israelites left

Egypt and entered Canaan. According to their chronology, Jericho was already in ruins by the time Israel had left Egypt. If they had followed the biblical chronology, however, it would have placed the exodus in the time of the 18th dynasty, more than a century earlier and at roughly the time of the destruction of Jericho. There is, thus, often a need for a correction, not of the Bible, but of the assumed results of earlier historical reconstructions.

The study of history and biblical archaeology is a complex task. The bottom line in the above observations is that the new archaeologists (minimalists) are sometimes guilty of passing on their judgments about biblical history without considering all the evidence. No one is suggesting they must take the Bible as true in order to use it in reconstructing biblical history. They should, however, take the Bible seriously as at least one version of that history worthy of consideration and evaluation.

To be sure, attempts to rethink the results of past work are admirable. While much of it might be called “revisionist” history, some of it may represent a serious attempt to look at the evidence in a new light. Biblical minimalists, however, are wrong in discounting the biblical narratives as part of the evidence. Biblical narratives as a whole cannot always be treated as eyewitness accounts. Much of the book of Kings, for example, records events several hundred years earlier than the time of its composition. That does not mean that these narratives are spun out of thin air. Here is where evangelicals may serve a valuable (if unappreciated) purpose in the larger scheme of things. They, as few others, are prepared to take these biblical texts at face value and ask how they fit into what historians and archaeologists tell us happened. ❖



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