



Part Two

Old Testament Archaeology 1

By

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Introduction

[The following is a compilation of articles written for FaithandSelfDefense.com during 2013-2014]

Journalists deal in **facts** – lots of them. We eat them for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We snack on them at midnight. Facts, facts, and more facts! So, what can possibly convince an atheist journalist about the existence of God? Facts – and lots of them.

I found discussions with Christians about science interesting, but those about morality were a bit disturbing. I couldn't see, hear or touch morality and there was no way to "test" creation theory in a laboratory. That's why I liked it when we started talking about archaeology and the Bible. Archaeology was something I could sink my teeth into because it dealt with things I could see, touch and test.

One of the Christians I was talking with in early 1971 had just written a book about the Bible and archaeology and gave me a copy to read. The title is "*The Philistines and the Old Testament.*" It was part of the Baker Studies In Biblical Archaeology series (Dr. Edward E. Hindson, Baker Book House, 1971). I read through the book in a couple of days and was hungry to read more about archaeology and the Bible. I was fascinated by the "facts" available to anyone who wanted to test the Bible to see if what it said about ancient people was true.

One of the things I found most interesting was how archaeological finds about ancient peoples matched amazingly well with the ancient writings in the Bible. The Philistines are mentioned more than 200 times in the Bible's Old Testament and what's written there is supported by many archaeological finds.

Some of the excavation sites discovered by 1971 included Ashkelon, Ashod, Ekron, Gath, Beth-shan, Beth-shemesh, Beth-pelet (Tell Fara), Gerar, and Gezer. Other Philistine finds included Megiddo, Beth-zur, Bethel, and Tell en-Nasbeth. What was found at the sites is important to understanding the connection between the Philistines and ancient Hebrews.

“Tell en-Nasbeth is probably to be identified with the Biblical town of Mizpah where Samuel (1 Sam. 7) defeated the Philistines. It was excavated between 1926-35 by F.W. Bade of the Pacific School of Religion, assisted by the staff of the American Schools of Oriental Research. [1] The mound is about seven miles north of Jerusalem. Jar handles found there with the word ‘Miz-peh’ stamped on them in old Hebrew letters led to the identification of the site as Mizpeh of Benjamin (Judg. 20:1). The fragments of Philistine pottery found here were from a time when the city was merely a country village but there was enough to show that the site was occupied in Samuel’s day. [2] (“The Philistines and the Old Testament”, Dr. Edward E. Hindson, Baker Book House, p. 78, 1971)

A Danish archaeological expedition excavated the ancient city of Shiloh (Tell Seilun) from 1926-29 and again in 1932. The team discovered that the town had been destroyed by fire about 1050 BC. This matches the Bible's details about the Philistines capturing the Ark of the Covenant at Shiloh (1 Samuel 4) after killing thousands of Hebrew soldiers.

The Philistines are first mentioned in the Bible in the Book of Genesis – “Pathrusim, and Casluhim (from whom came the Philistines and Caphtorim).” (Genesis 10:14)

“Most historians agree that they came from the eastern Mediterranean area but their original homeland and migration route are uncertain. [3] It is quite probable that they stopped at Crete, called Caphtor in the Old Testament (Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7). Also the term kerethi (“Cretans”) is used in Ezek. 25:16; Zeph. 2:5; 1 Sam. 30:14, to designate the “Philistines.” (ibid)

Abraham, the Hebrew Patriarch, made a covenant with Abimelech, leader of the Philistines, in Genesis 21.

“Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.” Genesis 21:32-34

Some have questioned the legitimacy of the Genesis account saying that the Philistines were not in the land as early as the time of Abraham and Isaac (20th and 19th centuries BC). However, there is evidence of Syro-Phoenician sailors traveling across the Mediterranean as early as that time. [4]

“Both Minoan and Mycenaean pottery and art have been found in abundance in Palestine long before the mass migration of the ‘Philistines’ there in 1200 B.C. [5] Other evidence of early Aegean peoples active in Palestine are the anthropoid clay coffins found in Palestine, Egypt, and Nubia in relation to Philistine mercenaries stationed these locations. The burial customs reflect Aegean practices (e.g., the gold foil mouth plates on the corpses) and contain Mycenaean pottery, indicating that they predate the production of Philistine ware. [6] Add to these factors the evidence pointed out by Wright that the Hebrew word pelistim was used for all the ‘Sea Peoples’ without discrimination. [7] Thus it is certainly not unlikely that Abraham could have had a commercial contact with an outpost of Aegean peoples trading in Gerar.” (“The Philistines and the Old Testament”, Dr. Edward E. Hindson, Baker Book House, p. 95, 1971)

Dr. Hindson’s book introduced me to the study of archaeology and “artifacts.” I liked that word because it dealt with “facts” and that’s what I trusted – **facts**.

Dr. Joseph P. Free was Professor of Archaeology and History at Bemidji State College and wrote *Archaeology and Bible History* in 1950. I read his 1969 revision (updated just two years before I was investigating the subject), where he opened the first chapter with a brief explanation about the functions of Bible archaeology.

“A friend once said to the writer, ‘What is the value of archaeology in relation to the Bible, anyway?’ We pointed out that numerous passages of the Bible which long puzzled the commentators have readily yielded up their meaning when new light from archaeological discoveries has been focused on them. In other words, archaeology illuminates the text of the Scriptures and so makes valuable contributions to the fields of Biblical interpretation and exegesis. In addition to illuminating the Bible, archaeology has confirmed countless passages which have been rejected by critics as unhistorical or contradictory to known facts. This aspect of archaeology forms a valuable part of the defense of the Scriptures, commonly known as apologetics. In summary it may be said that two of the main functions of Bible archaeology are the illumination and the confirmation of the Bible.” *Archaeology and Bible History*, Joseph P. Free, Ph. D., Scripture Press Publications, p. 1, 1969 Revised Edition

With a brief introduction to archaeology and the Bible, I was ready to investigate whether it could shine a light on my questions about the reliability of the Bible as an historical document and the truthfulness of its claims concerning the existence of God.

What had archaeology discovered by 1971 about ancient people in the Bible? More on that next time as we look at what convinced an atheist that there is a God.

[1] The excavation report was written by C. McGown, *Tell En-Nasbeth*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947)

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 54-61

[3] Cf., the comments of Noth, *op. cit.*, p. 78

[4] Cf., G. Dossin, "Les archives économiques du palis de mari," *Syria*, xx (1939), pp. 105-26

[5] Cf., above throughout chapter 3. Also note the comments of J. Pendlebury, *The Archaeology of Crete, an Introduction* (London: Burns & Oats, 1939) p. 170; W.F. Albright, "Some Oriental Glosses on the Homeric Problem," *American Journal of Archaeology*, liv (1950), pp. 162-76; F. Stubbings, *Mycenaean Pottery in the Levant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), pp. 84-86; W. A. Heurtley, "The Relationship between 'Philistine' and Mycenaean Pottery," *QDAP*, v (1936), pp. 90-110 (including illustrated comparisons)

[6] See the remarks by G.E. Wright, "Philistine Coffins and Mercenaries," *Biblical Archaeologist*, xxii (1959), pp. 54-66. He points out that the clay coffins from Tomb 570 at Lachish are the oldest, even though in Palestine, and must pre-date even the arrival of the Israelites to Palestine!

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 59, n. 10

Solid As A Rock

Solid evidence. Something an investigative journalist can sink his teeth into. That's what I needed to see in 1971. Christians I had invited on my radio talk show to intimidate and make fun of were turning the tables on me. Me! A well-known hard-core atheist talk show commentator was actually listening to Christians talk about why they believed in the existence of God. Sound ridiculous? I thought so at the time, but they kept coming back with more and more evidence. For a free-thinking journalist interested in knowing whether something's true or not, evidence is hard to ignore.

What I was hearing about how archaeology supported many of the claims in the Bible was impressive. One of the most impressive was the discovery of the Hittite nation.

People made fun of Jews and Christians for centuries because of this:

“On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the River Euphrates: the Kenites and the Kenizzites and the Kadmonites, and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Rephaim, and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Girgashites and the Jebusites.’” Genesis 15:18-21

The Old Testament mentions the Hittite people almost 50 times, but who were they? There was no record of their existence anywhere in the histories of ancient cities and civilizations. Critics of the Bible believed the Hittites were nothing more than an invention of the writers of the Bible and there was no evidence to prove otherwise. That is, until 1876, when a British scholar made a discovery that led to the uncovering of the history of a great nation known as – **the Hittites**.

Archibald Henry (A.H.) Sayce found inscriptions in Turkey that had been carved on rocks. He wrote about his find and the Hittite people in *“The Hittites: The story of a Forgotten Empire”* (New York, F.H. Revell Co. pref. 1888). Clay tablets were discovered at Boghaz-koy, Turkey about ten years later and German archaeologist and historian Hugo Winckler investigated the tablets and undertook his own expedition in 1906. Winckler and his team uncovered thousands of clay tablets that included a treaty between Egypt and the Hittite nation. Boghaz-koy was the location of the Hittite capital city and had been known originally as **Hattusha**. Winckler also found ancient temples, large sculptures and a fortified citadel. Tablets discovered in the temples confirmed many details about the kinds of treaties, ceremonies and regulations written about in the Old Testament.

One of the things archaeological expeditions discovered about the Hittite civilization was that it began around the early part of the 20th century BC in the western part of Asia, an area known as Anatolia, now known as part of Turkey. Hittite kings expanded it into an empire

by the 18th century BC and reached the height of power during the 14th century BC. The empire included most of Asia Minor, the northern Levant (Eastern Mediterranean area between Anatolia and Egypt, including Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine) and upper part of Mesopotamia (Assyria).

Abraham and his descendants encountered the Hittite people on many occasions in the land of Canaan. Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried “in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth.” (Genesis 25:7-10). Abraham’s grandson, Esau, married two Hittite women, which bothered his parents Isaac and Rebekah a great deal (Genesis 26:34-35).

Jacob, the brother of Esau, was also buried in the field Abraham purchased from Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite (Genesis 50:12-13). God told Moses during the 15th century BC that He would deliver Israel from Egyptian captivity and lead them “to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites.” (Exodus 3:8) The Israelites had many dealings with the Hittites during the 15th – 12th centuries BC, supported by the archaeological findings that the Hittites were a powerful people in the region during that time.

After the death of Moses, God told Joshua to cross the Jordan River and lead the people of Israel into their new home. God described where that would be: “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall *be able to* stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you.” (Joshua 1:3-5) God did as He promised and gave Joshua and Israel victory over Jericho, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Joshua 24:11).

However, Israel didn't destroy the Hittites. In fact, years after Joshua's death we see Israel living among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Even though God had sent Israel into the land to take it as their possession, they did not obey God. The Israelites took the daughters of these former enemies to be their wives and gave their daughters to be married to their sons. This intermarriage, which God had commanded Israel not to do, led the people of God to serve the gods of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites and other enemies of God (Judges 3:5-6).

The Hittite empire collapsed into several small “Neo-Hittite” cities by the 12th century BC. Some Hittites were even serving in the Israeli

army by the 11th century BC (1 Samuel 26:6; 2 Samuel 11:6). Those Hittites who had not been killed and were left in the land were forced into labor by King Solomon of Israel during the 10th century BC (1 Kings 9:20-21). Solomon disobeyed God and married many foreign women, including Hittites (1 Kings 11:1-3).

According to *The Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World* at Brown University in Providence, RI, the Hittite kingdom was the “first major imperial entity that had its core territories on the Central Anatolian Plateau.” The Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology has a helpful Power Point presentation about the Hittites online at proteus.brown.edu/mesopotamianarchaeology1007 that includes many photos of the temples and city gates at Hattusha.

For centuries, people laughed at Jews and Christians because of the Bible's information about the Hittites. To me, as an atheist, the archaeological findings that supported the existence of a powerful people known as the Hittites was strong evidence for the genuine historicity of the Bible. How could documents written centuries before an ancient civilization was discovered and proven to be authentic by modern scientific methods have been fraudulent? How could the writers of the Hebrew Bible who lived well before the 1st century AD have known a powerful nation existed that was not known to exist centuries later by any other means except that the writings of the Bible were true? At least about the Hittites! And if the ancient writings in the Hebrew Bible were true about the Hittites, what else about those writings might also be true? Could what the writers of the

Hebrew Bible wrote about the existence of God also be true?

As I continue to share about more archaeological finds that support information found in the Bible, here are some of the books available to me in 1971 that you may find helpful in your study. I will share more recent archaeological finds, books and articles in future posts.

In alphabetical order:

William F. Albright – *The Archaeology of Palestine* (1951) ... *The Archaeology of Palestine: From the Stone Age to Christianity* (1949/rev. 1960) ... *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (1963) ... *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (1968) ...

John Garstang – *The Hittite Empire* (London, Constable and Company, Ltd., 1929) ... *The Foundations of Bible History; Joshua, Judges* (London: Constable, 1931) ... *The Story of Jericho* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1940)

Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, (New York: Farrar, Strous and Cudahy, 1959)

Kathleen Kenyon - *Early Jericho, Antiquity 26* (1952) ... *Guide to Ancient Jericho*, Jerusalem (1954) ... *Some Notes on the Early and Middle Bronze Age Strata of Megiddo*, Eretz Israel (1958) ... *Excavations at Jericho, Volume I, Tombs Excavated in 1952-4*, London (1960) ... *Amorites and Canaanites*, (Schweich

Lectures Series, 1963), London : Published for the British Academy by Oxford *University Press (1966)

Fred Wright, *Highlights of Archaeology in the Bible Lands*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1955)

No Evidence?

For those of you who have studied Biblical archaeology, you'll recognize that I am not mentioning the greatest discoveries of the last 40+ years during this series. That's because I'm limiting my comments to those discoveries available for me to consider during the early part of 1971. These findings, and others too many to mention in a limited series, were part of my journey from atheist to theist.

The combination of atheist, investigative journalist and radio talk show host was certainly not conducive to any quick sell about the existence of God. I did not believe in God, I did not like people who believed in God, and I enjoyed making fun of them until they either hung up, yelled or cried. It didn't matter what they did, as long as what they did gave me the opportunity to ridicule them and their belief in God.

Ridicule, intimidation and bullying (RIB) are stock and trade for many atheists. I used those tactics and those are the same tactics atheists use today. Many atheists will say something like this – “There is absolutely NO evidence to support the Bible as being anything other than myth and legend.” NO evidence? Not true. That's where archaeology comes in – as evidence.

I, like so many baby-boomers, was born within a year after my father left military service at the end of World War II. One of the greatest archaeological discoveries supporting the accuracy of the ancient Hebrew Bible was made during that same period of time – in the late 1940s.

Interestingly, archaeologists did not make one of the most important discoveries. Bedouin shepherds found the caves about a mile from the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. A Jewish settlement was established in the late part of the 2nd century BC and was occupied until the Roman Army destroyed it about 68 AD.

The Bedouins initially found seven ancient scrolls in clay jars in one of the caves. They eventually came to the attention of Dr. John Trever of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR). He compared the scrolls to the oldest biblical manuscript known at the time and saw similarities. The ASOR made the announcement of the discovery in 1948. The first seven scrolls included the [Great Isaiah Scroll](#), the [Community Rule Scroll](#), the [Peshar on Habakkuk](#), the [War Scroll](#), the Thanksgiving Hymns and the Genesis Apocryphon.

Continuing the search for more scrolls in the caves became more difficult because of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, but the original cave was found in the early part of 1949. During the next several years, more caves were discovered containing thousands of biblical and

other Jewish documents. About 90% of the scrolls and fragments were found in Cave #4 (see photo above), including all or portions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Daniel, Ezekiel, Song of Songs and various ancient commentaries on the Writings in the Hebrew Bible.

Other scrolls found in the 11 Qumran caves included portions of 1 and 2 Kings, Psalms, Jeremiah, a scroll of Jubilees, the Wisdom of Sirach, the Targum of Job, the Book of Enoch. Many other Jewish documents were also found, including the Temple Scroll, Angelic Liturgy, Hymn to King Jonathan, Testament of Joseph, the Copper Scroll and the Damascus Document. Along with the scrolls and fragments, searchers found tefillin cases (phylacteries), mezuzah, jars, lamps, linens and leather objects.

Carbon dating tests done on a piece of linen in 1950 showed it was from the early 1st century AD, plus or minus 200 years. Carbon dating done on the scrolls showed them to belong to the last two centuries BC and 1st century AD. Paleographic dating (handwriting analysis) done on the Dead Sea Scrolls showed them to be from the same period of time as the carbon dating tests. Other tests done on the scrolls included parchment and ink which also supported the dating.

So what? What do old scrolls and stuff have to do with proving the existence of God? This is where we enter into textual evidence for the Bible. I knew little about Bible texts as an atheist, so Dr. Edward

Hindson guided me through the process of understanding what the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls meant for the credibility of the biblical documents.

The Hebrew Bible of the mid-20th century AD was made up of 22 Books. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the late 2nd century BC (Septuagint) contained 39 Books (same writings as the Hebrew Bible, but divided differently for Greek readers), plus several Apocryphal books. After the advent of Christianity, which included a majority of Gentiles by the end of the 1st century AD, many Jews turned away from using the Septuagint and supported using only the Hebrew Bible. However, prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, the oldest complete or almost complete copies of the Hebrew Bible were the [Aleppo Codex](#) (10th century AD) and [Leningrad Codex](#) (11th century AD).

Again, we ask, so what? The “what” is that the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible found among the Dead Sea Scrolls were almost identical to the copies made more than a thousand years later. It demonstrated in a powerful and evidential way that the Jewish Masoretes who made the 10th and 11th century copies were not inventing or re-inventing text, but carefully **preserving text** that had been written centuries before.

This was exciting news for both Jews and Christians. Jews now had access to texts of their Hebrew Bible that were more than a thousand years older than the oldest texts they had at the time. Christians who depended on the Hebrew text for their Old Testament (instead of the

Greek Septuagint) had more evidence that their translation was based on accurate accounts of original texts.

Dr. Hindson explained that every Book of the traditional Hebrew Bible is represented by the scrolls found at Qumran, except for Esther. That provided textual critics the opportunity to compare somewhat recent texts (10th century AD) with much older manuscripts (2nd century BC) to check for accuracy in transmission. Dr. Hindson also pointed out that the Dead Sea Scrolls were within just hundreds of years of the original writings instead of more than a millenium-and-a-half for the Masoretic texts. The fact that the Masoretic texts compared so well to the Qumran texts was evidence in support of the accurate transmission of the original writings of Old Testament prophets to the translations in use today.

As an atheist I had often asked Christians how anyone could trust the text of the Hebrew Bible (Christianity's Old Testament) if the oldest manuscripts were thousands of years distant from the original writings? Dr. Hindson introduced me to the archaeological discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and it demonstrated why we can trust those documents. The ancient scribes who copied the Hebrew texts carried along a special tradition that protected and preserved the copied texts from error — proven by the discovery of The Dead Sea Scrolls.

* Here are some of the Dead Sea Scroll research websites where you can see the ancient documents.

Israel Antiquities Authority - [The Dead Sea Scrolls Exhibition](#)

[The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library](#)

[Digital Dead Sea Scrolls](#) at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem

** Here are some of the research resources available to me during my investigation in 1971.

Albright, W.F. (1949), *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Hardmondsworth, England: Penguin Books)

Burrows, Millar; Trever, John; Brownlee, William (1950), *The Dead Sea Scrolls of St. Mark's Monastery, Vol. I, The Isaiah Manuscript and the Habakkuk Commentary* (American Schools of Oriental Research)

Sellers, O.R. (1951), *Radiocarbon Dating of Cloth from the 'Ain Feshka Cave* (Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research)

Albright, W.F. (1952), *The Bible After Twenty Years of Archaeology* (Religion in Life XXI, 4, 1952)

Cross, Frank M. (1955), *The Manuscripts of the Dead Sea Caves*

(Biblical Archaeology XVII)

Unger, Merrill (1954), *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan)

Cross, Frank M. (1955), *The Oldest Manuscripts From Qumran* (Journal Biblical Literature, LXXIV)

Fred Wright (1955) *Highlights of Archaeology in the Bible Lands*, (Chicago: Moody Press)

Yadin, Yigael (1957) *The Message of the Scrolls* (Simon & Schuster)

Kenyon, Kathleen (1957), *Beginning in Archaeology* (New York: Praeger)

Kenyon, Kathleen (1957), *Digging Up Jericho* (New York: Praeger)

Unger, Merrill (1957), *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Chicago: Moody Press)

Nelson Glueck (1959) *Rivers in the Desert*, (New York: Farrar, Strous and Cudahy)

Free, Joseph (1969), *Archaeology and Bible History* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press)

Ancient Conspiracy?

As any good atheist would have done more than 40 years ago, I ridiculed the history of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible. How could anyone believe what the Jews wrote about their national history when they were just trying to promote their own brand of "religion?" Why should I believe them?

The problem with that line of thinking, I discovered, was what to do about the histories of other ancient nations that gave credibility to many of the historical records in the Old Testament? Were the historians of other countries who served other gods somehow joined in the Jewish conspiracy to promote the one God of Israel? That didn't seem logical to me, so I looked deeper into several archaeological discoveries to see if I could find the truth. Could archaeology have the answer to my challenge to "Convince me there's a God?"

[I am not including any archaeological discoveries made after May of 1971 since I was investigating the claims of Christianity between January and May of 1971.]

Israel is one of the oldest nations and peoples in the world, dating back to the beginning of the 2nd Millenium with God's call to Abram to leave his Chaldean homeland and move his family to Canaan. In the years that followed, the descendants of Abram through Isaac and

Jacob dealt with many peoples and countries, both large and small.

We've already looked at Israel's interactions with the Philistines and Hittites, so we now turn to Assyria. It is first mentioned in the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 10:10. Nimrod, the great kingdom builder of Genesis 10, is identified as the builder of many cities in Mesopotamia.

“Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said, ‘Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Lord.’ And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah (that is the principal city).” Genesis 10:8-12

The map of Nimrod's expanding kingdom included much of the Middle East. Assyria was a major player in the northern part of the kingdom (now part of northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey). It was both a regional and major power during the years from the 3rd millennium to 1st millennium BC. Assyria rose to prominence during the 1st millennium under kings like Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal. What can we learn about Israel through Assyrian archaeology?

The Taylor Prism

Let's begin with the Taylor Prism. It stands just 15 inches high in its special location in the British Museum in London, England. Archaeologists believe the six-sided clay prism is about 2,700 years old and records some of the achievements of King Sennacherib of Assyria between 704-681 BC. Included in those achievements is Sennacherib's conquering of more than 40 cities in Judah.

“As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered them by means of well-stamped earth-ramps, and battering-rams brought thus near to the walls combined with the attack by foot soldiers, using mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out of them 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered them booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate. His towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them over to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Sillibel, king of Gaza. Thus I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute and the katrû-presents due to me as his overlord which I imposed later upon him beyond the former tribute, to be delivered annually.

Hezekiah himself, whom the terror-inspiring spendor of my lordship had overwhelmed and whose irregular and elite troops which he had brought into Jerusalem, his royal residence, in order to strengthen it, had deserted him, did send me, later, to Nineveh, my lordly city, together with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, precious stones, antimony, large cuts of red stone, couches inlaid with ivory, nîmedu-chairs inlaid with ivory, elephant-hides, ebony-wood, boxwood, and all kinds of valuable treasures, his own daughters, concubines, male and female musicians. In order to deliver the tribute and to do obeisance as a slave he sent his personal messenger.” (J.B. Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 2nd ed., Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955 ... 3rd ed. 1969)

This event was also recorded in the Hebrew Bible. It follows reforms in Judah by King Hezekiah.

“Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and true before the Lord his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart. So he prospered. After these deeds of faithfulness, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and entered Judah; he encamped against the fortified cities, thinking to win them over to himself. And when Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come, and that his purpose was to make war against Jerusalem, he consulted with his leaders and

commanders to stop the water from the springs which were outside the city; and they helped him. Thus many people gathered together who stopped all the springs and the brook that ran through the land, saying, 'Why should the kings of Assyria come and find much water?' And he strengthened himself, built up all the wall that was broken, raised it up to the towers, and built another wall outside; also he repaired the Millo in the City of David, and made weapons and shields in abundance. Then he set military captains over the people, gathered them together to him in the open square of the city gate, and gave them encouragement, saying, 'Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid nor dismayed before the king of Assyria, nor before all the multitude that is with him; for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles.' And the people were strengthened by the words of Hezekiah king of Judah. After this Sennacherib king of Assyria sent his servants to Jerusalem (but he and all the forces with him laid siege against Lachish), to Hezekiah king of Judah, and to all Judah who were in Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says Sennacherib king of Assyria: 'In what do you trust, that you remain under siege in Jerusalem? Does not Hezekiah persuade you to give yourselves over to die by famine and by thirst, saying, 'The Lord our God will deliver us from the hand of the king of Assyria'? Has not the same Hezekiah taken away His high places and His altars, and commanded Judah and

Jerusalem, saying, 'You shall worship before one altar and burn incense on it'? Do you not know what I and my fathers have done to all the peoples of other lands? Were the gods of the nations of those lands in any way able to deliver their lands out of my hand? Who was there among all the gods of those nations that my fathers utterly destroyed that could deliver his people from my hand, that your God should be able to deliver you from my hand? Now therefore, do not let Hezekiah deceive you or persuade you like this, and do not believe him; for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people from my hand or the hand of my fathers. How much less will your God deliver you from my hand?' Furthermore, his servants spoke against the Lord God and against His servant Hezekiah. He also wrote letters to revile the Lord God of Israel, and to speak against Him, saying, 'As the gods of the nations of other lands have not delivered their people from my hand, so the God of Hezekiah will not deliver His people from my hand.' Then they called out with a loud voice in Hebrew to the people of Jerusalem who were on the wall, to frighten them and trouble them, that they might take the city. And they spoke against the God of Jerusalem, as against the gods of the people of the earth—the work of men's hands. Now because of this King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz, prayed and cried out to heaven. Then the Lord sent an angel who cut down every mighty man of valor, leader, and captain in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned shamefaced to his own land. And when he had gone into the temple of his god,

some of his own offspring struck him down with the sword there. Thus the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all others, and guided them on every side. And many brought gifts to the Lord at Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations thereafter.” 2 Chronicles 31:20 – 32:23

I was experienced enough as a journalist to know that opposing sides have differing views of who won and lost, but it's interesting to note in the non-biblical history of King Sennacherib that he was killed by one or more of his sons (see [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)), just as the Hebrew Bible recorded. While there is some debate among scholars about which son or sons killed the king, the Hebrew Bible records that it was Adrammelech and Sharezer and that their brother Esarhaddon became king.

“Now it came to pass, as he was worshiping in the temple of Nisroch his god, that his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him down with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. Then Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.” 2 Kings 19:37

Sennacherib's Wall

What about the Bible's mention in 2 Chronicles about Sennacherib's siege of Lachish? Is that supported by any archaeological find? It is, on what's known as Sennacherib's Wall. Archaeologist Henry Layard discovered the wall in Nineveh in the mid-1840s and wrote extensively about it several years later (*The Monuments of Nineveh*, 1849; *Inscriptions in the Cuneiform Characters*, 1851; and *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh*, 1853). Sennacherib's wall about his victory of Lachish took up almost 70 linear feet and included the king's attack on the city gate using battering rams.

Given the great pride and detail of Sennacherib's defeat of Lachish, it's interesting to note no archaeological finds concerning Sennacherib's defeat of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. If Sennacherib had conquered Jerusalem, it would seem that the Assyrian king would have made much of that in an even larger wall and more prisms. The Old Testament records Sennacherib's defeat by the supernatural God of Israel and his return "shamefaced to his own land."

[Read more about Sennacherib's defeat in Isaiah 37]

More archaeological finds from other ancient nations in our next post that support many historic details recorded in the Hebrew Bible as I continue to share what convinced me to leave atheism for theism more than 40 years ago.

Impressed

As an atheist I believed in what I could see, not in what I could not see. The “natural” was something I could see – the “supernatural” was not. So, the archaeological finds that supported various aspects of the historicity of the Old Testament impressed me. Even though most of the ancient discoveries were located in museums around the world, being able to see photos of the objects and knowing that I could see them in person if I wanted to helped me in my investigation about whether the Old Testament of the Bible was verifiable on any level. I was especially interested in whether the Old Testament was rooted in myth and legend or in history.

The 19th and 20th centuries AD were a great period of time for archaeological discoveries about some of the oldest civilizations of the world. Oriental studies and research led many explorers and archaeologists into the Middle and Far East looking for ancient treasures. Some of them that we've already looked at include the Philistines, Hittites, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Assyrians. Another ancient people recorded in the Old Testament and uncovered by archaeologists are the Moabites.

The Moabites were an ancient people living in an area of the Middle East known as Moab. Moab was located just east of the Dead Sea, directly across from the ancient Kingdom of Judah. Moab is first mentioned in Genesis 19.

“Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day.” Genesis 19:36-37

Lot was Abraham’s nephew, so Moab and his family were relatives of Abraham’s son Isaac and his son Jacob (Israel). However, the Moabites and Israelites were not usually friendly relatives. The Old Testament of the Bible records many problems between the two peoples, but where’s the proof that the Moabites existed and that they had any relation with ancient Israel?

One such archaeological find is known as the Moabite Stone, also known as the Mesha Inscription or Stele (named after King Mesha of Moab). F.A. Klein discovered the stone in 1868 and a French scholar named Charles Clermont-Ganneau made a “squeeze” impression of the writing for further investigation. Arabs in possession of the stone reportedly broke it into several pieces. However, more than half of the stone’s pieces were found and eventually housed at the Louvre in Paris.

Dating of the Mesha Stele is to the middle of the 9th century BC. It commemorates the victory of King Mesha and his troops over the king of Israel and his armies. Here’s how the Moabite inscription reads. (A reminder that Chemosh was the chief god of the Moabite people.)

I (am) Mesha, son of Chemosh-[...], king of Moab, the Dibonite—my father (had) reigned over Moab thirty years, and I reigned after my father,—(who) made this high place for Chemosh in Qarhoh [...] because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries. As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years (lit., days), for Chemosh was angry at his land. And his son followed him and he also said, “I will humble Moab.” In my time he spoke (thus), but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel hath perished forever (Pritchard, 1958a, p. 209).

The Mesha Stele names the nation Israel and two of its kings, Omri and his son. King Mesha admitted that King Omri humbled Moab for many days, but said it was because Chemosh was angry at his land. Mesha said that Omri's son also humbled Moab, but that Mesha triumphed over him and his house. How does that compare to the Bible's reference to King Mesha and the Moabites during the same period of time (9th century BC)?

“Now the rest of the acts of Omri which he did, and the might that he showed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel? So Omri rested with his fathers and was buried in Samaria. Then Ahab his son reigned in his place ... Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab. ... Now Jehoram the son of Ahab became king over Israel at Samaria in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and reigned twelve years ... Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheepbreeder, and he regularly paid the king of Israel one

hundred thousand lambs and the wool of one hundred thousand rams. But it happened, when Ahab died, that the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel. So King Jehoram went out of Samaria at that time and mustered all Israel. And he said, "I will go up; I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses ... And when all the Moabites heard that the kings had come up to fight against them, all who were able to bear arms and older were gathered; and they stood at the border. Then they rose up early in the morning, and the sun was shining on the water; and the Moabites saw the water on the other side as red as blood. And they said, 'This is blood; the kings have surely struck swords and have killed one another; now therefore, Moab, to the spoil!' So when they came to the camp of Israel, Israel rose up and attacked the Moabites, so that they fled before them; and they entered their land, killing the Moabites. Then they destroyed the cities, and each man threw a stone on every good piece of land and filled it; and they stopped up all the springs of water and cut down all the good trees. But they left the stones of Kir Haraseth intact. However the slingers surrounded and attacked it. And when the king of Moab saw that the battle was too fierce for him, he took with him seven hundred men who drew swords, to break through to the king of Edom, but they could not. Then he took his eldest son who would have reigned in his place, and offered him as a burnt offering upon the wall; and there was great indignation against Israel. So they departed from him and returned to their own land." 1 Kings 16:27-28; 2 Kings 1:1; 3:1, 4-7, 21-27

Though the endings of the stories are different, what we see is the record of an ancient enemy king of Israel confirming basic historical information about Israel's kings, their humbling of Moab and a revolt by Moab against Israel. That's a lot of confirmation in the world of ancient civilizations.

Some of the reference books and articles available for research on this subject in 1971

Albright, W. F. "Palestinian Inscriptions." In *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, edited by James B. Pritchard, 320-22. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969.

Miller, Patrick D. "A Note on the Mesha Inscription." *Orientalia* 38 (1969) 461-64.

G.W. Anderson; "The History and Religion of Israel"; Oxford University Press, 1966

Answers

Many atheists have asked me why I converted from strong atheism to Christianity rather than to some other belief system. The simple answer is that Christians had the answers to my questions. I had studied various Eastern religions years earlier and didn't find truth in any of them. Atheism was the only belief system that made sense, until I met Christians who were well-educated, thoughtful and patient.

This series of articles, *Convince Me There's A God*, is for the purpose of answering atheists who have asked me to be specific about what convinced me to become a Christian.

One of the strongest points of convincing came from Middle East archaeology. I looked at finds from ancient Moab, Assyria, Philistia and Anatolia, then turned to the history of the Medo-Persian Empire and one of its greatest rulers, King Cyrus. I was especially interested in **The Cyrus Cylinder** because of its connection to ancient Israel.

King Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great) was born in Anshan during the early part of the 6th century BC. He was the son of King Cambyses I and grandson of King Cyrus I. Anshan was part of the ancient Elamite Empire and located in what is now the western part of Iran. Cyrus II founded the Achaemenid Empire (also known as the First Persian Empire) by defeating the Kingdom of Media, the Kingdom of Lydia, and the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus the Great was also known as the King of Persia, King of Sumer and Akkad, The Great King, King of

Babylon and King of the Four Corners of the World.

After conquering Babylon, Cyrus freed thousands of slaves and issued a human rights declaration. That declaration is listed on the Cyrus Cylinder, currently located in the [British Museum in London](#). The small clay cylinder, discovered in 1879 AD during excavations of ancient Babylon, details Cyrus' conquest of Babylon and how he organized the return of many captives from Babylon to their homelands and helped restore their temples. The date of the edict on the cylinder is approximately 538 BC.

Isaiah, a Hebrew prophet who prophesied in both the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel during the latter part of the 8th century and early part of the 7th century BC, predicted the Medes defeat of Babylon more than a century before Cyrus II conquered Babylon (Isaiah 13:1-22; 21:1-10). Isaiah also named Cyrus and said he would do the will of Jehovah – “Who says of Cyrus, ‘*He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be built, And to the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’*” (Isaiah 44:28)

In approximately 538 BC, King Cyrus released his command:

“I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world, son of Cambyses, the great king, king of the city of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, the great king, ki[n]g of the ci[ti]y of

Anshan, descendant of Teispes, the great king, king of the city of Anshan, the perpetual seed of kingship, whose reign Bel (Marduk) and Nabu love, and with whose kingship, to their joy, they concern themselves. When I went as harbinger of peace i[nt]o Babylon I founded my sovereign residence within the palace amid celebration and rejoicing. Marduk, the great lord, bestowed on me as my destiny the great magnanimity of one who loves Babylon, and I every day sought him out in awe. My vast troops were marching peaceably in Babylon, and the whole of [Sumer] and Akkad had nothing to fear. I sought the safety of the city of Babylon and all its sanctuaries. As for the population of Babylon [...], w]ho as if without div[ine intention] had endured a yoke not decreed for them, I soothed their weariness; I freed them from their bonds(?). Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced at [my good] deeds, and he pronounced a sweet blessing over me, Cyrus, the king who fears him, and over Cambyses, the son [my] issue, [and over] my all my troops, that we might live happily in his presence, in well-being. At his exalted command, all kings who sit on thrones, from every quarter, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, those who inhabit [remote distric]ts (and) the kings of the land of Amurru who live in tents, all of them, brought their weighty tribute into Shuanna, and kissed my feet. From [Shuanna] I sent back to their places to the city of Ashur and Susa, Akkad, the land of Eshnunna, the city of Zamban, the city of Meturnu, Der, as far as the border of the land of Guti – the sanctuaries across the river Tigris – whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of

their people and returned them to their settlements, and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus – to the fury of the lord of the gods – had brought into Shuanna, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every day before Bel and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my lord, this: ‘Cyrus, the king who fears you, and Cambyses his son, may they be the provisioners of our shrines until distant (?) days, and the population of Babylon call blessings on my kingship. I have enabled all the lands to live in peace.’
(British Museum, Cyrus Cylinder Translation)

The Bible says that Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah the priest, was called to be a prophet in the 13th year of the reign of King Josiah of Judah (toward the end of the 7th century BC). Jeremiah proclaimed God’s judgment on Judah and its capital city Jerusalem during the rule of several kings. Jeremiah told Judah they would be in captivity to Babylon for 70 years.

“Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Because you have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,’ says the Lord, ‘and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against these nations all around, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, a hissing, and perpetual desolations. Moreover I will take from

them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. 'Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,' says the Lord; 'and I will make it a perpetual desolation. So I will bring on that land all My words which I have pronounced against it, all that is written in this book, which Jeremiah has prophesied concerning all the nations. (For many nations and great kings shall be served by them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and according to the works of their own hands.)' Jeremiah 25:8-14

Jeremiah was not taken into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar, but he did write to the elders who were carried away into captivity to warn and encourage them.

"Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your

prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.” Jeremiah 29:5-14

The fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy began in the first year of the reign of King Cyrus of Persia.

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May his

God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.” Ezra 1:1-4

What followed was the return of thousands of Jews from captivity in Babylon to the land of Judah.

“Then the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered. King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods; and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. This is the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives, thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar kind, and one thousand other articles. All the articles of gold and silver were five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar

took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.” Ezra 1:5-11

The Cyrus Cylinder, an archaeological find of the 6th century BC, is supportive of both Isaiah's prophecy from the 8th century BC and Jeremiah's prophecy from the 7th century BC. Does that prove conclusively the God of Israel exists? Not yet, but the evidence is mounting.

History or Myth?

The Hebrew Bible records the history of the world in some detail, but the history of Israel in great detail. Rather than a book of myth and legend, the Hebrew Bible was written as an historical narrative of a people and their God. That means their existence, both people and God, can be investigated according to historical detail.

When I was looking into the claims of Christianity in 1971, I found archaeological discoveries in Palestine of great interest in supporting the historicity of biblical writings. The nation of Israel, beginning with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, interacted with many other tribes, city-states and nations. We've already looked at some of the ancient finds from ancient Babylon, Assyria, Philistia and Moab. We turn now to Egypt.

Egypt is one of the oldest countries in the world. I wrote extensively about Egypt in [*A History of Man's Quest for Immortality*](#) (Fifth Estate Publishing, 2007). The biblical timeline of its history with Israel began about 4,000 years ago when Abram and his family traveled from Ur to Haran to Canaan to Egypt. What evidence exists to support this timeline?

Ur

Let's begin with Abraham's genealogy. Genesis 11 says that Abraham (Abram) descended from the line of Shem (son of Noah). After several generations a man named Terah married and had three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran. They lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, but was that a real place? If Ur wasn't real, maybe Abram wasn't real.

Representatives from the British Museum excavated an ancient site in the middle 19th century A.D. believed to be the ancient city of Ur. It's located in the Dhi Qar Province of southeast Iraq – “the land bordering the head of the Persian Gulf between the Arabian desert and the Euphrates delta” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Was it plausible or even possible that archaeologists had actually discovered the ancient home of Terah and Abram? If so, what could they learn about the kind of life they would have lived before moving to Haran and later Canaan?

One of the obvious questions when studying the ancient Chaldeans is whether there were a people with that name during the lifetime of Abram. The Bible dates Abram's life from the late part of the Third Millennium B.C. to the early part of the Second Millennium B.C. (based on dating the Exodus according to 1 Kings 6:1), but I read that the first mention of Chaldea was in the annals of the Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II from the middle of the Second Millennium B.C., centuries after Abram's life. Could it be that the Bible writers were wrong about Abram's birthplace or wrong about the existence of

Abram?

Serious excavations of Ur (modern Tell el-Muqayyar, Iraq, “important city of ancient southern Mesopotamia (Sumer)” located about “140 miles (225 km) southeast of the site of Babylon” – [Encyclopedia Britannica Online](#)) began soon after World War I by archaeologist H.R. Hall of the British Museum. [Sir Leonard Wooley](#), another famous British archaeologist, [began an excavation of ancient Ur in the early 1920s that continued for more than ten years](#). It was a joint venture of the [British Museum](#) and the [University of Pennsylvania](#).

Wooley’s archaeological team discovered that settlers moved to the region during the Fourth Millennium B.C. Ur became the capital of southern Mesopotamia during the middle of the Third Millennium B.C. Cemetery excavations found royal tombs filled with great treasures and evidence of a highly developed civilization. The evidence included weapons, mosaic pictures, musical instruments, statues, engraved shell plaques and carved cylinder seals. Wooley also found evidence that the people who served the kings were buried with them. The findings also confirmed the existence of King Sargon I.

Other discoveries included a temple and ziggurat which helped date the city to the Third Millennium B.C. Wooley’s team discovered that the citizens of Ur worshipped the moon god Nanna (Sin), “patron deity and divine king of Ur” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). That would seem to indicate Abram and his family would have worshipped the gods of Ur. Is it possible that the father of monotheism had been

a polytheist? Joshua, the man the Bible says led the people of Israel into the promised land, spoke briefly about the family of Abram serving “other gods” before God called him from the “other side of the River” to travel to “the land of Canaan” (Joshua 24:2-3).

[Courtesy Bible-Archaeology.info]

The term “the River” at this point in Bible history usually identifies the Euphrates River, one of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2. It runs more than 1,700 miles from Eastern Turkey south through Syria and Iraq to where it joins with the Tigris River just north of the mouth of the Persian Gulf. When we look at a map of what would have been Abram’s journey from Ur to Haran to Canaan, he would have crossed the Euphrates River.

One of the discoveries Wooley’s team made in the royal cemetery in Ur is known as the Royal Standard of Ur. It was a hollow wooden box about the size of a small briefcase with inlaid mosaics, dating to about the middle of the Third Millennium B.C. (see photo at top of article). Because of damage to the box from being buried for more than 4,000 years, Wooley’s team had to rebuild it from what remained. The mosaic pieces had kept their form in the soil, so excavators covered them with wax and were able to see their original design.

As Wooley and others looked at the reconstruction, they saw scenes of life in Ur depicting both times of war and times of peace. As you can see in the photo of the “Standard” in the British Museum (see above), the images are laid out in three rows on all sides of the box. Details of both war and peace helped archaeologists date the box to the Third Millennium B.C.

The dating of the city of Ur to the Third Millennium is interesting for many reasons, but during my investigation about the existence of God, and specifically the God of the Bible, it helped confirm the possibility that Abram could have been a real person living in Ur during that time.

“This is the genealogy of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran begot Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in his native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Then Abram and Nahor took wives: the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran.” Genesis 11:27-32

Haran

Did Haran exist at the time of Terah and Abram? One of the archaeologists Wooley worked with prior to excavations at Ur was T.E. Lawrence (also known as Lawrence of Arabia). Lawrence surveyed an ancient site hundreds of miles north of Ur in modern Turkey known as Harran. Archaeologist Seton Lloyd, well known for his excavations in Egypt, also surveyed the area decades later and a serious excavation of Harran began in 1951 under the guidance of Dr. D.S. Rice. Ancient ruins there have also been dated to the Third Millennium B.C. Archaeologists discovered that the moon god “Sin” was the major deity of Harran. Harran was also located along an important trade route in the ancient Near East and became a vital merchant outpost.

The Bible states that Terah died in Haran and God called Abram to leave Haran and travel to “a land that I will show you.” That land was known as Canaan. Genesis 12 says that Abram moved his family to Canaan and it was there that God promised to give the land to Abram’s descendants. The Bible states that Abram built an altar in Shechem, pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east and built another altar there “and called on the name of the Lord.

Question – did Shechem, Bethel and Ai exist during the late Third Century B.C.?

Shechem

Archaeological excavations of Tell Balata (ancient Shechem) began in the early 20th Century A.D. by a group of German scholars and continued after World War I. American archaeologists continued the research in 1956. Interestingly, the Bible calls Shechem a “place” in Genesis 12 and a “city” in Genesis 33. That is consistent with archaeological findings that the earliest urbanization of Tell Balta was in the early part of the Second Millenium B.C. and that Shechem would not have had fortification walls when Abram traveled through the area.

Bethel

Excavations at the village of Beitin began in the mid-19th century by Professor Edward Robinson and continued into the 20th century with archaeologists W. F. Albright and James Kelso. They published “The Excavation of Bethel” three years before I began looking into the claims of the Bible. They believed the area had been populated from the late part of the Third Millennium B.C.

Ai

Edward Robinson was also involved in locating the ancient city of Ai, which was close to Bethel. The site of Ai, known as Et-Tell, is located less than two miles from Beitin (Bethel). W.F. Albright and John Garstang surveyed the area in the early 20th century and concluded that Et-Tell was the site of ancient Ai. Findings also dated the city to the Third Millennium B.C.

* Excavations in the region since 1971 point to the possibility that the ancient cities of Bethel and Ai may be located a short distance away from the earlier sites or that residents moved locations sometime during the Second Millennium B.C.

** The Ebla Tablets, discovered in the mid-1970s, support the earlier findings of archaeologists concerning many of the areas I studied during my investigation, but I am not referring to them because the tablets were not available for my research in 1971.

*** Links to further research:

<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/amen/a/122710-CW-Archaeological-Evidence-About-The-Story-Of-Abraham-In-The-Bible.htm>

<http://www.tms.edu/tmsj/tmsj20a.pdf>

<http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=40085>

<http://www.bible-history.com/archaeology/babylon/standard-of-ur-bb.html>

<http://www.truthnet.org/Biblicalarcheology/2/Patriarchalperiod.htm>

<http://www.truthnet.org/Biblicalarcheology/4/>

http://creationwiki.org/Ur_of_the_Chaldees

<http://www.bible-archaeology.info/abraham.htm>

Clues

As I investigated the claims of the Bible concerning [Abram leaving Ur of the Chaldees](#), traveling to ancient Haran, then on to Canaan, I came across many archaeological discoveries that supported the dating of the story in Genesis about his life and journey. I had been told for a long time that the stories in the Bible were fairy tales without any possible connection to real people and historical facts, but archaeologists had been finding clues for more than a century that demonstrated the historical nature of Genesis. Real people, living real lives, interacting with other real people.

In the case of Abraham, whether he was real or myth would have a serious impact on billions of people who believe he is the “father” of their religion (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Islam).

[A reminder that I am including only those archaeological references available for my research during the first half of 1971.]

“Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land. And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, ‘Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance. Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may

live because of you. So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house. He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels." Genesis 12:10-16

Genesis claims that soon after Abram arrived with his family in Canaan he had to deal with a "famine in the land." Abram traveled to Egypt to live there for awhile because the famine "was severe in the land." In 1971, when I was investigating the Bible for the first time, were there any archaeological findings that might support severe famines in Canaan during the years Abram was first in the land? Any support for people in Canaan traveling to Egypt and being allowed to live there during famines? What other archaeological evidence is there for the story of Abram (Abraham) in the Bible?

Question

Are there any archaeological findings that might support severe famines in Canaan during the years Abram was first in the land and any support that people in Canaan traveled to Egypt to find food?

According to Genesis 12:4 Abram was 75-years-old when he left Haran for Canaan. Estimates of his birth date are toward the end of the 3rd Millennium, so that would place Abram's visit to Egypt toward

the end of Egypt's First Intermediate Period and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (approximately 2100-2040 BC). This included a time of a weakened central government and different leaders vying for the throne. Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II was a pharaoh during the 11th Dynasty (approximately 2046 – 1995 BC) and was able to finally reunite Egypt and bring the First Intermediary Period to an end.

Famines (often caused by drought) were a serious problem in the ancient world because it was rooted in an agricultural economy. Egypt had a history of helping feed people in the region. Archaeologist/Egyptologist Gaston Maspero was the first to investigate the Pyramid of Unas in Saqqara in the latter part of the 19th century AD. King Unas was the last king of the 5th Dynasty (2464 – 2325 BC – Encyclopedia Britannica). Archaeologists Alessandro Barsanti and Sir Charles Firth investigated the ruins during the early part of the 20th century AD. Findings included a long causeway that linked the mortuary and valley temples. Relief scenes on the walls of the causeway showed starving people. Some Egyptologists have surmised that King Unas included the famine reliefs because feeding starving people would have been one of his good deeds to take with him into the afterlife (Ancient Egypt, Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin, Barnes & Noble Books, 2003, pg. 95). Archaeologists also found scenes of trade with foreigners, some who may have come from Canaan.

French Egyptologist Jacques Vandier wrote in 1950 about the tombs of Ankhtyfy and Sobekhotep. In the tomb of Egyptian provincial governor Ankhtifi, Vandier found an inscription that read – “The whole of Upper Egypt died of hunger and each individual had reached such a state of hunger that he ate his own children. But I refused to see anyone die of hunger and gave to the north grain of Upper Egypt. And I do not think that anything like this has been done by the provincial governors who came before me....I brought life to the provinces of Hierakonpolis and Edfu, Elephantine and Ombos!” (Wikipedia) Dating of that famine is believed to be toward the end of the First Intermediate Period.

[A wall painting found in a tomb](#) dated from the late 20th century BC in Beni Hasan shows a group of Asiatic nomads visiting Egypt from Syria-Canaan (University of Pennsylvania, School of Arts and Sciences). Archaeologists explored the tombs of Beni Hasan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries AD. Their findings support the probability of trade and travel between Canaan and Egypt during Abram’s lifetime.

Question

Is there archaeological support for domesticated camels being used in Egypt during the Third Millennium BC?

Genesis claims that the pharaoh treated Abram well and gave him sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels. Camels domesticated in Egypt in the Third

Millennium? Bible critic T.K. Cheyne wrote in 1899 that believing in domesticated camels in Abraham's time was "unfounded." British zoologist George Cansdale wrote in 1970 that domesticated camels in the Third Millennium "seem unlikely."

However, German paleontologist and geological archaeologist Friedrich Eberhard Zeuner (Institute of Archaeology, University of London) wrote in his book, *A History of Domesticated Animals* (Hutchinson, 1963), about the domestication of camels in the Egyptian region during the Third Millennium B.C.

Archaeologist Joseph P. Free wrote this 70 years ago:

"Archaeological evidence showing early knowledge of the camel in Egypt includes statuettes and figurines of camels, plaques bearing representations of camels, rock carvings and drawings, camel bones, a camel skull, and a camel hair rope. These objects, some twenty in number, range from the seventh century B.C. back to the period before 3000. ("Abraham's Camels," Journal of Near Eastern Studies, July 1944, 187-93)

British Egyptologist Kenneth A. Kitchen (School of Archaeology and Oriental Studies, University of Liverpool) also wrote about archaeological support of camels being used in Egypt during the time of Abraham.

"It is often asserted that the mention of camels and of their use is an anachronism in Genesis. This charge is simply not true, as there is both philological and archaeological evidence for knowledge and use of this animal in the early second millennium BC and even earlier. While a possible reference to camels in a fodder-list from Alalakh (c. eighteenth century BC) has been disputed, the great Mesopotamian lexical lists that originated in the Old Babylonian period show a knowledge of the camel c. 2000/1700 BC, including its domestication. Furthermore, a Sumerian text from Nippur from the same early period gives clear evidence of domestication of the camel by then, by its allusions to camel's milk. Camel bones were found in house ruins at Mari of the pre-Sargonic age (twenty-fifth to twenty-fourth centuries BC), and also in various Palestinian sites from 2000 to 1200 BC. From Byblos comes an incomplete camel-figurine of the nineteenth/eighteenth centuries BC. This and a variety of other evidence cannot be lightly disregarded. For the early and middle second millennium BC, only limited use is presupposed by either the biblical or external evidence until the twelfth century BC." (Ancient Orient and Old Testament, Kenneth A. Kitchen, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966, pp. 79-80).

Question

Is there archaeological support for Abram and his wife using a female servant to produce an heir?

Ancient documents from the Second and Third Millennium BC were discovered in the town of Yorghhan Tepe in Iraq during the late 19th century AD. Archaeologists with the American Schools of Oriental Research and Harvard University conducted digs during the early part of the 20th century and discovered hundreds of cuneiform tablets. Most were legal and business documents from the Hurrian period during the early Second Millennium BC. Some dated to the Akkadian Empire period in the Third Millennium. The tablets are housed in the Iraq Museum (Baghdad), Harvard Semitic Museum (Cambridge, Massachusetts) and the Oriental Institute (Chicago).

Yorghhan Tepe was known as **Nuzu** (or Nuzi) during the Second Millennium (Akkadian name was Gasur). It's located near the Tigris River, north of Abraham and Sarah's birthplace of Ur. The tablets shed light on the lives of people living in Mesopotamia during the Second and Third Millenniums, including family practices. It was common practice for a childless couple to adopt a slave as an heir (e.g. Eliezer of Damascus – Genesis 15:2) and to produce an heir through a female servant (e.g. Hagar – Genesis 16:1-4).

The possibility of Abraham being a real person during that time period had the ring of truth to it as I investigated the lifestyles of heads of

family (e.g. tribal chief, nomadic/semi-nomadic chieftain). That was a big jump for me from “fairy tale” to “possible.”

Possibility

The Bible story about Abraham became a “possibility” for me as an atheist based on the archaeological evidence available during my 1971 investigation into theism and Christianity. It seemed from what I was researching that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jacob’s sons “could” have lived during the time frame the Old Testament claimed in the locations it described.

I continued to ask questions about the patriarchs and discovered more evidence from archaeology. Each discovery seemed to lend more support to the credibility of the writings in the Old Testament from an archeological perspective. Archaeologists had found evidence for many of the ancient cities mentioned in the Bible with details about how people lived, worked and worshipped that matched much of what the Old Testament writers included in the process of describing how the Hebrew patriarchs lived and how they interacted with people from other people groups and nationalities.

Rather than the Bible being (as I supposed at the time) a fairy tale filled with legends and myths, I began to see it as history. I had a lot more researching to do to see if the history it presented was credible and believable, but the important point for me was that I was seeing the Old Testament as an historical document that could be tested against other historical documents and against the discoveries of archaeology.

Though Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's sons lived in the land of Canaan, the nation of Egypt is referred to many more times in Genesis about the lives of the Patriarchs. Egypt was a large country with great wealth and power, hundreds of thousands of citizens and a long history of accomplishments. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons were members of a small, semi-nomadic family, well-acquainted with Egypt.

One example is when Abram and his family traveled to Egypt because of a severe famine in Canaan. Pharaoh treated Abram well for the sake of Sarai (Abram's wife) and they returned to Canaan from Egypt with sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and male and female servants (Genesis 12:16). One of the those female servants was a young woman named Hagar. Sarai was not able to bear children at the time, so she gave Hagar to Abram.

“Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan ... So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.”
(Genesis 16:3, 15)

Ancient tablets, like the Mari Tablets discovered by French archaeologists during the 1930s AD (at Tell Hariri), confirmed the common use of many personal names and towns listed in Genesis. Ruins of ancient Mari are located in Syria on the Euphrates River

near the border with Iraq. The city was an important trade center along the route between Egypt, Babylon and Persia. Archaeologists found thousands of clay tablets that included town and personal names. Among them were **Nahor** (personal name of Abram's brother – Genesis 11:27 and home town of Rebekah - Genesis 24:10), Abram the **Hebrew** (*'ibri* in Hebrew – Habiru in Mari tablets – Genesis 14), **Abam-ram** (Abraham), **Jacob-el**, **Banu-yamina** (Benjaminites), **Arriyuk** (Arioch – Genesis 14:1). The use of these names in the Mari Tablets does not necessarily point to the same persons in the Genesis account, but demonstrates that the names were common during the period of the Patriarchs.

[The [Ebla Tablets](#) - discovered by Italian archaeologists in the mid-1970s - are another example of ancient tablets that support information in the Genesis account, but were not available during my investigation in 1971.]

The economy of Egypt was built along the Nile River, fed by melting mountain snow that caused the Nile to flood the river valley. The annual floods receded and left rich topsoil along the banks of the Nile. Egyptians used that soil to plant and harvest two or three crops a year between floods. It was those crops that often brought people to Egypt because of frequent droughts in Canaan.

Egypt was to play a major role in the lives of the patriarchs. Genesis records a covenant ceremony where God promised Abram that his descendants would have the land "from the river of Egypt to the great

river, the River Euphrates.” (Genesis 15:18). During that same covenant ceremony, God told Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet complete.” (Genesis 15:13-16)

One question that stumped me at first was how Abraham’s descendants could return during the fourth generation if they were going to be afflicted for four hundred years? Wouldn’t that stretch the understanding of a generation from 40 years to 100 years? That sounded wrong – and it may have been – not because Genesis was wrong, but because my understanding of the beginning of the affliction may have been wrong.

First, some background about how I viewed the affliction of Jews in Egypt. I remember going to a movie with my father in 1956 titled *The Ten Commandments*. It starred Charlton Heston in the role of Moses. I understood from the movie and Sunday School classes that the affliction of the Jews began sometime after Joseph died and a new man became pharaoh who did not know Joseph (Exodus 1). 15 years later as an atheist investigating whether the Genesis text could be true, I questioned how 400 years could be four generations as God had said?

What I was shown was another possibility – that the affliction had started many years earlier with Ishmael's attitude toward Isaac.

“So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac.’ And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son. (Genesis 21:8-11)

It was important to see the emphasis on the fact that Ishmael, who was scoffing about his half-brother Isaac, was the son of “Hagar the Egyptian.” If we count the years from Ishmael's scoffing to the descendants of Abraham leaving Egypt, it's very close to the 400 years prophesied in Genesis 15.

As for God saying – “But in the fourth generation they shall return here” – we look to the genealogy of Moses, who led the Jews out of Egyptian slavery, beginning with Levi. Levi moved with his father (Jacob) and brothers from Canaan to Egypt (Genesis 46). Their descendants remained in Egypt until Moses led them out. Here is the genealogy from Levi to Moses according to Exodus 6. Notice the number of generations from when Israel entered Egypt to when Israel departed Egypt.

Levi —> Kohath —> Amram — > Moses

In the fourth generation, just as God had promised Abraham. I still had questions and was skeptical as an atheist, but found the answers and possibilities I was discovering interesting and challenging to my unbelief.

That led to my next question – was there any archaeological evidence to support the story of Jacob (Israel) and his family moving to Egypt and remaining there until Moses led them out?

The story begins with a father's love and sibling jealousy. Jacob had 12 sons and a daughter. He loved his 11th son more than all his children, because Joseph "was the son of his old age" (Genesis 37:3). Joseph's older brothers hated him so much that they couldn't even speak peaceably to him (Genesis 37:4). That hatred grew to the point the older brothers conspired to kill the 17-year-old Joseph. However, the oldest brother Reuben, convinced the other brothers to throw Joseph in an empty pit (Genesis 37:21-24). Reuben was hoping to get Joseph back to his father safely, but Judah (one of the older brothers) suggested selling Joseph to Midianite traders (Ishmaelites) for twenty shekls of silver. The traders paid the money and took Joseph to Egypt (Genesis 37:26-28). The brothers made up a story to tell their father that a wild animal had killed and eaten Joseph. The news devastated Jacob and he mourned for Joseph for many days (Genesis 37:31-35). The Midianite traders sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard

(Genesis 37:36).

Prior to my investigation I had believed that the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors was myth and Israelites being slaves in Egypt miraculously freed by Moses was legend. What came from the investigation? Answers next time as we continue to search for truth about the existence of God.

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