

The Role of Archeology in Bible Study

by John C. Jeske

The history of people and of nations has always held a special interest for the child of God, because he knows that millennia ago God saw fit to initiate history. He made a man and a woman. He made and kept a promise of Abraham's numerous descendants living in a land named Canaan, and especially of Abraham's great Descendant, who lived and died in that land. What God has to say to a world of lost sinners He said on a background of history—to chosen people, in a given situation, at a particular place, at the proper time.

Since the child of God is interested in God's precious plan for restoring sinful mankind to Himself, he will be interested in whatever can shed light on the unfolding of that plan. This is why archeology has captured the fancy of Bible students, especially during the last half-century.

Much of this interest is good, and these lines are written to document some of the benefits accruing to the Bible student who will familiarize himself with the results of archeological research. But there is another side to this coin. There are dangers attendant upon the study of archeology. There is a danger, first of all, confronting the archeologist. Archeological data must be interpreted, and is often capable of more than one interpretation. Archeologists have sometimes begun their work with preconceived notions of what they wanted to find at a given site. Archeological reports, even some of the latest ones, confuse reporting facts with drawing conclusions. This fact led an American archeologist to say recently: "Don't ever read an archeological report as Gospel truth!"

A similar danger faces the Bible student every time he reads an archeological report. He is going to have to guard against making that report say what he wants it to say. Example: in the 20's Sir Leonard Woolley found evidence of an extensive flood while excavating the site of ancient Ur of the Chaldees. Does this give us the right to say that Genesis 7–8 have now been documented? Surely a pious, but utterly unwarranted conclusion drawn from insufficient evidence! Mindful of the dangers that confront both archeologist and Bible student, we ask: "What are the values that Biblical archeology brings into Bible study?" Our answer is threefold.

The first value of archeology for the Bible student is that *it has helped to fill in the historical background of the Bible.*

Archeology is a comparatively recent science. It wasn't till 1878 that we had an accurate map of Palestine, and then it was only of Western Palestine. Digging was done as early as the time of the Civil War, but Sir Flinders Petrie, the father of professional archeology, did not excavate in Palestine until 1890. Although digging was done sporadically in succeeding years, it wasn't until after World War I that it began in earnest. It can be said that it is in the last few decades that archeology has rediscovered the Near East.

Unfortunately, until comparatively recently an archeologist was often more of an adventurer than a scientist, digging recklessly through precious ruins in search of golden cups, exotic statues, and jewel-decked mummies. He often gave little thought to the great bulk of material representing the common people of an ancient civilization—objects telling how they lived, what they made, how closely they might resemble modern man. The damage done to ancient sites by earlier archeologists is considerable and cannot, of course, be undone.

Perhaps a case history contrasting the old and the new approaches to archeology will be helpful. Lying on the plain of Palestine midway between Jerusalem and Joppa is the city of Gezer. Gezer was successively an ancient Canaanite settlement, an Egyptian outpost, and (after Pharaoh Shishak gave it as dowry to his daughter, Solomon's wife) an Israelite fortress. Gezer was excavated by Macalister, a British archeologist about the turn of the century, at a time when archeology was still in its infancy. Macalister not only directed the excavation, but served also as administrator, architect, and recorder, a fact which led a noted Israeli archeologist to remark: "This is why deciphering the results of Macalister's excavations is one of the most difficult problems in Palestinian archeology." Macalister worked with 200 laborers. Fortunately, he was not able to attain his goal: to turn over the entire mound. He filled in his previous excavation with debris from the new. Nothing of profit

remains from his work. He missed most of what Gezer offered; for example, he discovered only 8 of 25 strata. Worse yet, he destroyed much, and the archeologists working at Gezer today cannot always be sure, eg., whether they are digging in an ancient refuse heap, or in a previous archeologist's debris dump.

The duties required of the modern archeologist have made the "lone wolf" approach obsolete. An archeological expedition under the direction of Dr. William Dever is at work at Gezer today, reworking the site. The 1971 season is the eighth of a ten-year project. Dr. Dever heads a group of experts—anthropologists, language specialists, geologists, geographers, photographers, surveyors, draftsmen, mechanics, besides diggers. The team excavating Gezer includes even a paleobotanist and a paleoethnologist, as well as specialists in environmental studies. For each month spent at the dig, the archeologist knows he will spend three months deciphering, evaluating, and interpreting the data and artifacts uncovered, seeking opinions from museum and university specialists all over the world, classifying, recording, and finally publishing the results of the excavation. The archeologist's annual budget at Gezer is \$100,000, in spite of the fact that most of the laborers are unpaid volunteers.

The efforts of archeologists have borne fruit. The information they have recovered from the earth has helped to fill in our knowledge of Bible backgrounds. Excavations in Mesopotamia have shed light on the 19th and 18th Centuries B.C., the patriarchal period. From this significant period of Bible history we have vast collections of letters and legal documents and business texts: tax receipts, grocery lists, copies of court decisions, business correspondence, government foreign office documents, police reports, census records—even a jeweler's moneyback guarantee! The largest single body of these are the Mari Tablets, 20,000 cuneiform clay tablets discovered only 35 years ago, which constituted the royal archives of an ancient kingdom on the middle Euphrates dating back to the 18th Century B.C. Understandably, these documents throw unexpected light on the patriarchal period.

Another important source of information on life during this period in ancient Mesopotamia are the Nuzi Tablets. These come from a city east of Assyria which reached its peak in the middle centuries of the second millennium B.C. These tablets inform us, e.g., that there was a close cultural association between possession of the family gods (the teraphim) and the right of inheritance. "In special circumstances, property could pass to a daughter's husband, but only if the father had handed over his house gods to his son-in-law as a formal token that the arrangement had proper sanction." (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, III, 574). When Rachel stole her father's images, she may have been motivated not so much by superstition as by shrewd concern that Jacob secure inheritance rights.

Excavations have shown that the ass's jawbone which Samson used as a weapon need not have been an unusual relic of an animal skeleton lying in that place by chance, but rather an implement commonly used in the agriculture of that day. Pieces of sharpened flint were fitted into the empty tooth sockets along the length of the curved jawbone, and the result was a sickle for cutting grain—or on occasion, an efficient weapon for cutting clown a thousand men.

Some of the nations of the ancient Near East are little more than names on the pages of the Scripture. Archeology has fleshed out our picture of the Hittites and the Philistines, for example. Our newly-gained awareness of the religious rites of the ancient Canaanite occupants of the Holy Land, evidenced by the erotic fertility goddesses of the day, makes God's command "Eradicate them!" easily understandable.

In the years following 1947 the scholarly world was surprised by the incredible discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These leather and papyrus scrolls shed considerable light on the intertestamental period. The community which produced the Scrolls was a Jewish sect, usually thought to be Essene, living near the place where John the Baptist began his ministry. Because the members of this sect disagreed with the way things were managed by the priestly leaders at Jerusalem, they withdrew to the Judean wilderness, where close to the desolate shore of the Dead Sea they built a private, secluded world for members only, dedicated to the goal of complete perfection. The extensive literature they produced gives us a new understanding of the religious climate into which the Christian Church was born.

No one can study the results of archeological research without acquiring a new respect for ancient civilizations. We have long known that most of the occupants of the ancient Near East were polytheistic. We

now learn that they were cultured, too. Some of the ancient writing systems were amazingly complicated. The Babylonians started our alphabet, invented irrigation, divided the circle into 360 degrees and the hour into 60 minutes. People then were just as brilliant as now; our generation simply has the benefit of the accumulated experiences of previous generations.

God in His mercy saw fit to put the wisdom of heaven into the language of earth. The moment we recognize that fact, the elements of language become important for us. The same God who put HIS Son into a donkey's feedbox put the news of that Son into words and phrases and sentences and books. It is this fact which underlies the interest which the Lutheran Church has traditionally shown in studying the original languages of the Bible. Etymologies and connotations of words, meanings of idioms, functions of parts of speech, structure of sentences—these are the swaddling clothes in which a loving Father has seen fit to give us His Son. Here again archeology can make a contribution to biblical studies. *It has added enormously to a fuller understanding than otherwise possible of the language and literature of the Bible.*

In the first place, archeology has helped us to recover and establish the original text of the Old and New Testament Scriptures. As late as 1947 an Old Testament scholar lamented: "In the realm of textual criticism it seems that our work is all but over. We have simply exhausted the materials with which we can carry on our attempts to recover the original text of the Old Testament writings." Ironically, in the same year as that scholar voiced his lament, an Arab shepherd accidentally discovered some dusty scrolls in a cave near Qumran, on the Dead Sea. The Qumran materials (400 scrolls and 40,000 fragments) enable us to trace the history of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament to a degree previously impossible.

The Scrolls have also had their effect on New Testament studies, by helping us to understand more fully the "Jewishness" of the New Testament. Any Bible student who had regarded the language of the New Testament as an isolated theological and literary phenomenon will have to revise his opinion. Prior to 1947 scholars had variously identified the origin of certain New Testament phraseology. Some professed to find evidences of Iranian dualism in St. John's Gospel & Epistles; others were sure the unusual vocabulary represented a late pattern of Hellenistic Gnostic thought. The Dead Sea Scrolls help us to see this is not so. The language of the New Testament is abundantly illustrated in the Scrolls. Expressions found include the following: "spirit of truth and of error," "light of life," "to do truth," "sons of light," "life eternal," as well as the contrasting expressions "light and darkness," "truth and error," "spirit and flesh," "death and life." St. John's vocabulary is not Iranian or Greek, but just plain home-grown First Century South Palestinian.

Biblical archeology, however, has helped us to understand better not only the background of the original languages of the Bible, but also the meaning of the words themselves.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the thousands of clay tablets uncovered forty years ago in Ugarit, north of Canaan proper. Here we have a vast body of texts from the fifteenth to the twelfth centuries B.C., written in a poetic Hebrew dialect corresponding to the language of the early psalms. When you remember that the Bible contains 1500 hapaxlegomena and an additional 3000 words used fewer than five times, one can appreciate that these tablets from Ugarit have widened and deepened our understanding of biblical Hebrew vocabulary and syntax. (For examples, cf. the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 67, 223f.). In a lecture last year, Dr. Mitchell Dahood, one of the world's foremost scholars of Ugaritic, remarked: "Israel's poets were not hicks ... I never cease to marvel at their proficiency, especially at their variety of parallelistic expressions."

Here, surely is another benefit archeology offers to Bible study: it has added to a fuller understanding of the language of the Bible.

Perhaps the most spectacular, as well as the most abused, contribution archeology has made to biblical studies is that *it has confirmed the sacred record.*

Let it be stated at the outset that it is not the purpose of archeological research to prove the correctness of the statements of the Bible. Let it also be emphasized that the believing child of God will not ask to have God's Word rendered more palatable. Christ had a name for His followers when they hesitated to trust His spoken word without proof: "O ye of little faith!" Although there is much in the Bible which can be archeologically confirmed, there is much more which cannot and need not and never will be historically substantiated. How could you document scientifically the vicarious atonement? or the resurrection of our Lord?

Would a Roman grave seal bearing the shattered imprint of Pilate's signet prove to believer or unbeliever that Christ left the grave on Easter Sunday? Does the fact that ten years ago diggers found a mosaic synagog floor in Galilee and nearby a dedication stone bearing the name of Pontius Pilate mean that now we can confess the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed with new conviction?

These considerations do not, however, lessen our appreciation of the archeologist's findings. Although he does not seek to confirm the truthfulness of Scripture, and although our faith does not ask for proof of the Bible's truthfulness, yet we welcome the evidence which decades of archeological research have provided, and for two reasons: *to fight against our old Adam, and to refute the extreme claims of Bible critics.*

The tendency to doubt the truthfulness of God's Word is not something on which Abraham or the twelve disciples had a monopoly. The same fickle heart which prompted their doubts beats within our breast. Who of us has not asked himself: "Can I trust that those things which are reported as facts in the Scripture are actually as factual as, say, the flight of Apollo 15?" The stakes in this battle for believability are high. Once you start putting question marks behind Bible statements, where do you stop? If I cannot be sure Christ's corpse came back to life, can I be sure mine will? If I cannot be sure the Scripture is factual when it speaks of Christ's second coming, can I be sure it is reliable when it tells me of His first coming?

How easily the college-age Christian may be impressed by the theory that traditional beliefs are really only the envelope in which God's message was sent, an envelope which may be discarded if it seems not to harmonize with current scholarly consensus. Our old Adam is all too ready to concede that perhaps the "facts" recorded by historians and prophets on the pages of the Scripture are really only folk legends with halos.

Archeology has placed another weapon in our hands in this never-ending battle against our old Adam. Here is another reason why we rejoice at the ample documentation which archeology has given the sacred historical record.

For centuries the only reference in all of ancient literature to an Assyrian king named Sargon was on the pages of the Bible. Since secular historians were silent, many students questioned the very existence of Sargon. 2500 years later, the archeologist's spade turned up thousands of clay tablets which give ample evidence of this fierce warrior-king, who called himself "master of all the lands from the Persian deserts to the Mediterranean."

II Kings 3 tells of a joint Israel-Judah punitive expedition against the nation of Moab, which had rebelled at paying tribute. This expedition was unknown from secular sources. In 1868 a German missionary was visiting biblical sites, and at Dibon (east of the Dead Sea) he saw a large smooth stone in the sand with an inscription carved into it. This black basalt stone turned out to be Palestine's earliest written document, the so-called Moabite Stone. It is the Moabite record of the military expedition recorded in II Kings 3, written from a pagan viewpoint and dedicated to the god Chemosh.

II Kings 24 records that in the first phase of the Babylonian Captivity King Jehoiachin (Heb. יהויכין, *Yoyachin*) together with a number of Judah's leaders went into exile. In 1933 Dr. Ernst Weidner was working in the Berlin Museum, translating tablets found in Babylon a third of a century earlier. Four separate tablets listed deliveries of rations of oil and barley from the royal commissary to "Yauchin, king of Judah." These tablets are dated "the 13th year of Nebuchadnezzar," five years after the first deportation.

The purpose of Biblical archeology is not to prove that the Bible is truthful, but rather to interpret the Bible as fully as possible. However, the statement of William Foxwell Albright, clean of America's archeologists, is nonetheless true: "The result of archeological excavation is throughout favorable to the biblical record."

As we fight the good fight for truth, our worst enemy beats within us. There are, however, other enemies whom we ought to recognize. Bible-believing Christians have often been put on the defensive by critics who attack the historicity of the Scripture. The professional historian of antiquity has often looked with a skeptical eye upon the evidence of traditions, such as those incorporated in Homer and Herodotus and, he would add, even in the Old Testament. A century ago, therefore, there were "experts" who claimed that Tiglath-Pileser never existed, although the Bible refers to him as the Assyrian king who conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Now, in the rubble of Assyria's capital city, archeologists have found clay bricks bearing the inscription:

“I, Tiglath-Pileser, king of the west lands, king of the earth, whose kingdom extends to the Great Sea . . .” Here is a contribution of archeology for which the Bible student will be grateful. By confirming the Bible record, archeology has refuted many extreme claims of critics.

As late as the time of World War I scholars did not yet know that a Hebrew alphabetic script existed before the 8th or 9th century B.C.; therefore they thought that the Psalms couldn't have been produced any earlier than the period of the Hebrew kings. In 1917 Gardiner, noted British Egyptologist, first deciphered early Semitic inscriptions found at Mt. Sinai ten years earlier. These inscriptions, written in a pictorial script by Canaanites before the middle of the second millennium B.C., prove that alphabetic writing existed before the time of Moses. In addition, ancient Ugaritic parallels to the Psalms have been uncovered dating back to the 13th century B.C., several hundred years before David. These discoveries explode any theory which attacks the Davidic authorship of the Psalms as unrealistic.

Critics were convinced that the Book of Daniel was inaccurate since it referred not to Nabonidus, the last neo-Babylonian king, but to Belshazzar. “But cuneiform documents have brought to light the extraordinary and unpredictable exile of Nabonidus from Babylon to Arabia, so that the ‘kingship’ of Babylon was left to Belshazzar, his son” (Edwin M. Yamauchi, quoted in *Christianity Today* Feb. 14, 1969, p. 9).

As recently as 1930, C. Torrey, in his *Pseudo-Ezekiel and Original Prophecy*, denied the authenticity of Ezekiel's prophecies by years of King Jehoiachin's captivity and also Ezekiel's picture of the material situation of the exiles. In less than ten years Torrey had his comeuppance. “Discoveries of jar-stamps in Palestine in the 1930's and the publication of the ration texts from Babylon in 1939 have fully vindicated Ezekiel” (Wm. F. Albright, *The Biblical Archeologist*, 5, 49f.).

It would be good to remember this when in days ahead voices are raised which in the name of scholarship attack the veracity of the Scripture. Dr. Robert Dick Wilson, former professor of Semitic philology at Princeton, said after 45 years of scholarly research: “No man knows enough to assail the truthfulness of the Old Testament.” Archeology has made that more clear than ever.

Every gift of God can be abused, and archeological research is no exception. It would be utterly unscientific to accept every tentative archeological evaluation as Gospel truth. One dare not lose sight of the fragmentary nature of archeological exploration. In the first place, only a fraction of what is made or written ever survives. In addition, major excavations have been made at fewer than five percent of potential Near East sites. It must also be remembered that only a small fraction of any archeological site is actually examined. An example will illustrate. From 1955–1958 Yigael Yadin, one of Israel's top archeologists, conducted an excavation at the city of Hazor, ten miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Hazor was a Canaanite royal city whose king headed the North Canaanite coalition against Joshua. Years later, Solomon rebuilt and fortified Hazor. The site at Hazor comprises an upper city of 30 acres, and a lower city of 175 acres. Working with an unusually large staff of more than thirty archeologists and a crew of more than a hundred laborers, Yadin managed to clear 1/400 of the site in four years. He has suggested that it would take 800 years of about four or five months work per year to clear the entire site.

The Bible student will do well to maintain balance in his attitude toward the results of archeological exploration. On the one hand, he will not overestimate its importance, or be frightened by unwarranted claims. But on the other hand, he will be careful not to be indifferent toward or even unappreciative of the contribution archeology has made, and undoubtedly will continue to make, to biblical studies.