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Does Archaeology Prove the Bible?

by
John F. Wilson

From time to time stories appear about dramatic archaeological discoveries which seem to verify some aspect of a biblical text. Reading these, many people tend to conclude that the main purpose of archaeological research is to “prove the Bible is true.” Thus, when I am asked by churches to speak on the topic “Archaeology and the Bible” I am well aware of the expectations. The audience is poised to hear one powerful example after another of how the spade has turned up irrefutable evidence of the inspiration of the Scriptures.

But the use of archaeology in apologetics is a two-edged sword. It is true there have been cases in which discoveries have provided evidence that some person or place mentioned in the Bible did in fact exist, despite the doubts of some critics. Recently an inscription found at ancient Dan, in northern Israel, provided the first extra-biblical reference to King David, for example — surely a lesson to those who claim he belongs only to mythology. An ossuary found just south of Jerusalem, also very recently, apparently contains the very bones of Caiaphas the High Priest, mentioned so prominently in the Gospels, lending historical plausibility to the often maligned account of the trial of Jesus. Many other examples could be given.

We must remember, however, that merely proving that an ancient document is historically accurate does not prove it to be inspired. After all, archaeology has sometimes verified a detail from the works of Homer. For every case in which the Bible has been corroborated by archaeology, a similar case might be presented for the corroboration of some historical detail in the works of the first century Jewish writer Flavius Josephus. But no one has seriously suggested that Homer or Josephus therefore speak for God!

Furthermore, anyone who has ever been involved in field archaeology knows that the conclusions drawn by the archaeologists are often subject to question by other scholars. These conclusions are far more tentative, and far more subjective, than the popular articles one might read about them would indicate. Archaeologists, like other scholars, are notorious for changing their minds, or for interpreting the same set of data differently one from the other. Many years ago archaeologists pointed to certain collapsed walls found at Jericho as “proof” for the biblical story of that city’s capture by Joshua and the miraculous destruction of its walls. Then a generation of archaeologists arose, using the same data, and roundly denied that it proved the biblical story. In

fact, they said, nothing has ever been found at Jericho dating anywhere close to the time of Joshua! Walls may have fallen outward, but certainly not at the time, or for the reason, which the Bible account suggests.

Now, if we had counted on the conclusions of the first group of scholars for our faith in the Scriptures, then what would be our response to the second? Would we claim they were somehow less “scientific” than the first group? And on what basis, and with what claim to expertise, would we make that charge? It should be noted, by the way, that both the “David” inscription at Dan and the “Caiphas” inscription from Jerusalem, *may* be read differently from the way the discoverers read them, and *may not* refer to the biblical David or the biblical Caiphas at all. I believe that they do in fact refer to the biblical characters. But I must balance my enthusiasm with my experience at various meetings of professional archaeologists, where I have heard the discoverers give their reports to colleagues. On those occasions they sound much less sure of their conclusions than they do when being quoted by the secular press.

It would seem unwise, therefore, to base one’s faith, or even to attempt to bolster one’s arguments about the truth of the Gospel, on the shifting sands of scholarly opinion in any field, including archaeology.

I do not mean that archaeological data cannot sometimes provoke strong spiritual experience. One such experience is the impact which physical artifacts coming directly from the biblical world can have in focusing on the reality of that world. Even believers tend to think of the world of the Bible as a kind of literary entity, having no substance in the “real world” which we live in each day. One may claim to believe a biblical story and yet, perhaps unwittingly, mentally place that story in the “never-never land” where fairy tales take place.

An ancient coin lies on my desk as I write these words. It bears this inscription, written in clear Greek letters: EPI BASILE AGRIPP (“Under the jurisdiction of King Agrippa”). Every time I hold this coin, encrusted with the dirt of the centuries, worn and corroded by the ages, I experience the story related in Acts 25:13-26:32 in a way I never could have, had this coin not come from the ground and into my hand. This coin somehow verifies for me that this King Agrippa, who told the Apostle Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” (Acts 26:28), was not a mere literary device, but a real king. It was he who gave the order to mint the coin I now hold in my hand — the same man who, according to the book of Acts, once talked with Paul face-to-face and heard his warning about “righteousness, and self

control, and judgment to come.”

But what I am experiencing as I contemplate this coin has its origins in the substance of my own faith, not in the little circle of bronze. The coin does not “prove” that Paul and Agrippa ever met, or that the defense which Luke describes ever took place, or that the gospel which Paul preached was in fact the truth of God. Archaeology, then, is far more valuable in bringing the believer “back to earth” — in reminding him or her that God has acted in history and not merely in books — than it is in stopping the mouths of the gainsayers or eliminating the possibility of doubt. If archaeology could settle the matter of faith, then archaeologists would be the most faith-filled people on earth. But they are not. Some believe, some do not, just as is true with the rest of humankind.

Beyond its ability to confirm the reality of the world of the Bible as a substantial world filled with real people, real places and real events, archaeology performs other important services for the Bible student. Many biblical passages are illuminated by archaeological finds. This is one of the most fruitful areas of investigation nowadays, when more discoveries are being made, and those discoveries better understood, than at any other time in history. But I cite only one very old example: In 1871 and 1938 stones were found in Jerusalem bearing inscriptions which seem to be the very ones mentioned by Josephus (Ant. 15.11.5). They read “No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and enclosure around the temple area. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which will follow.” Armed with these discoveries, go and read Acts 21:27-36, which describes the riot which broke out when the Jerusalem crowds thought Paul had brought a foreign gentile into the forbidden area. Is not the rage of the crowd better understood because of the discovery of these ancient inscribed stones?

Many other examples exist. Any modern Bible student who wants to find all the light possible in interpreting and understanding the text should diligently keep abreast of the discoveries now regularly being published from excavations in the biblical world. Because of the sophistication of modern archaeological technique, the amount of new data which can be placed at the service of biblical studies is truly amazing. A good place to begin would be to examine all the issues from the last ten years of two magazines: **The Biblical Archaeology Review** and **The Biblical Archaeologist**. Every good public library should subscribe to both. For the advanced student, more scholarly journals such as **The Israel Exploration Journal** and the **Palestine Exploration Quarterly** provide up-to-date

archaeological information. A host of useful books are now coming onto the market. Only one will be mentioned here. No one interested in this subject should be without John McRay's **Archaeology and the New Testament** (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1991).

Archaeology can not, and should not, become the basis for faith in the Scriptures, and certainly not

for faith in the Gospel. It is nevertheless an exciting field which can throw much light on the texts which carry the message of God to our lives.

John F. Wilson serves as Dean of Seaver College, Pepperdine University and as an elder of Malibu Church of Christ, Malibu, California.