

Jonah-Habakkuk: The God of Israel and the God of the Nations - Lesson 3

Supplement Six.

Archaeology's Contribution to Old Testament Study.

I. Introduction.

In this section, we will examine the historical significance of the archaeological discoveries that go beyond the specific types of finds discussed previously. These additional discoveries provide valuable information about people, places, and events mentioned in the Bible. We will then look at some of the contributions archaeology has made to biblical studies, but we will also examine several limitations. After these discussions, you will be ready to apply all your newfound insights.

II. More Valuable Insights from Archaeology

Beyond the specific types of discoveries discussed previously, archaeology has provided valuable insights into people, places, and events which are found in the biblical text.

A. People.

Archaeology has given historical credence to many individuals mentioned in the Bible, such as the prophet Balaam (Nu 22-24). Texts found at Deir 'Alla (on the east side of the Jordan) have attested to his existence. Archaeology has shown the importance of historical figures such as Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus. It has also informed our knowledge of the people of the Old Testament by adding facts and perspectives not found in Scripture. A good example is the archaeological evidence related to the reign of the Persian king Xerxes (Hebrew Ahasuerus). He is portrayed with his father on the reliefs at Persepolis, where Darius sits on his throne in his robe of state and behind him stands the crown prince.

Events recorded in Scripture are a part of ancient Israelite history. The central theme of the Bible is the history of that stream of human activity, which found its consummation in the New Testament, the Messiah, and the church. That stream did not flow in an isolated channel but mingled with the other tributaries of universal human history, and is understood to a much greater extent when it is viewed as part of a more complex whole.

Archaeology has opened people's eyes to the distant past in which the biblical events occurred. Ancient Sumer, whose existence was not even guessed at previously, is now recognized as a foundational civilization of the biblical world. Its contributions in terms of technology and thought have been traced into subsequent cultures, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, which were intimately connected with the history of ancient Israel. Similar information has been revealed about the ancient Egyptians, Canaanites, and other people groups on the fringe of Israel's existence. The knowledge that has been gleaned about these peoples includes their languages and writings, their literature and art, their institutions, religions, and history, at least in part.

B. Places.

Archaeological excavations can inform us about biblical places in many of the same ways they inform us about people, largely through written records. Sometimes this information involves cities like Jerusalem, Babylon, and Nineveh that figure prominently in the biblical record. Excavations at Nineveh have provided more light on ancient Assyrian history, literature, and culture than any other site. The description of this ancient capital as "a very important city" (Jnh 3:3) is hardly hyperbole. From Nineveh's walls, temples, palaces, inscriptions, and reliefs, silent witness is given to a city that flourished up until the time of its destruction by the Babylonians in 612 B.C. Other cities such as Ur and Hazor play relatively insignificant parts in Scripture, but were important centers and have been excavated to great advantage.

Archaeological research has established the identity of literally hundreds of places, in Mesopotamia, Persia, ancient Canaan, and Egypt, that are mentioned in the Bible. Through the excavation of biblical sites, a great deal has been learned of the nature and development of ancient architecture. The form and content of houses, palaces, temples, stables, and city walls and gates are now quite well known. We have a much clearer picture of what Solomon's temple looked like because of the Canaanite temples that have been excavated, which exhibit the same general plan.

C. Events.

Some events are important to world history, but are passed by without the barest reference in the Bible. The famous battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.) is the best example of this. The monolith inscription of Shalmeneser III gives a record of this famous military engagement, in which a large coalition of western states, including Ahab of Israel, prevented the Assyrian king from exerting his influence in the west and reducing the Israelites to vassal states.

Something of only passing interest to the biblical authors such as the fall of Lachish to Sennacherib in 701 is illuminated in reliefs depicting the event on the walls of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh. The fall of the city to Nebuchadnezzar's forces more than a century later is the background for the Lachish letters, some military correspondence depicting the critical situation on the eve of the collapse of Judah. Both of these destructions are further supported by data gleaned from ongoing excavations at the site.

The discovery of thousands of historical texts in Egypt and Mesopotamia has enabled scholars to work out the historical chronology of the ancient world in considerable detail. Historical synchronisms have been established for dating the accession of Solomon (c. 970 B.C.), the accession of Jehu, a king in the northern kingdom of Israel (841 B.C.), the fall of Samaria (722 B.C.), and the first capture of Jerusalem (March 15/16, 597 B.C.). These dates in turn provide a framework for the chronology of the kings of Judah and Israel. For those periods in which no synchronism have been discovered, a relative chronology has been worked out in considerable detail based upon pottery dating techniques.

III. Role of Archaeology in Interpretation.

It can certainly be said that archaeology has played an important role in helping readers better understand the Bible. Archaeology has provided much useful information for people desiring to

gain a fuller appreciation of Old Testament times, but we must always keep in mind there is much more to be learned. Sound scholarship should never be dependent on the chance find of the archaeologist's spade. One should never forget that the Bible contains two kinds of truth, statements of faith and statements of historical fact. Statements of faith are not susceptible to the same types of inquiry as are the records of historical happenings and persons. Archaeological research has greatly increased our knowledge and understanding of the historical record, but we should be careful to never use it to prove the Bible in terms of statements of faith.

The Bible is a collection of literary and historical documents covering more than twenty centuries. The first essential task of the interpreter is to determine what the writer originally sought to communicate and to whom he or she first directed his or her communication. That is why all information that provides contemporary comment on social, political, or cultural background, which clarifies literary form and convention, explains language, or throws light on habits of thought and speech is relevant to interpretation.

In the case of the Old Testament, such information is chiefly archaeological. Around the whole sweep of the Fertile Crescent, the remains of peoples, cities, and empires, epigraphical, architectural, artistic, and of every other sort of which archaeology takes widening and increasingly expert notice, have elucidated and illuminated the text of Scripture from Genesis to Malachi.

A. Valuable Information.

Archaeology has provided us with a new open door to the study of ancient civilizations, which in turn has helped us to understand and interpret better our ancient historical records. Every area of biblical research has been illuminated and brought into sharper focus by the knowledge that comes from ancient Near Eastern archaeology. Our understanding of each major period of biblical history has been broadened and deepened by ever-increasing archaeological discoveries.

The apologetic value of archaeology is almost too well-known to need illustration. Archaeological discoveries have confirmed every period of biblical history, whether the general accuracy of the patriarchal background (evidenced in the Nuzi tablets, Mari tablets, etc.), or specific details such as the confirmation of the existence of the once-doubted Hittites (evidence from Boghaz-koy), or once-mentioned individuals, as Sargon (Isa 20:1), or doubted narrative records, as Sennacherib's recorded failure to capture Jerusalem (2Kings 19:35-36). Although much more could be said about the positive benefits of archaeology, there are some limitations.

B. Limitations of Archaeology.

All the work of archaeological organization, expense, time, and effort invested in excavations are pointless without a detailed interpretation of the data produced and the communication of that data to interested parties. Other limitations of archaeology include the following:

1. A significant limitation of biblical archaeology is the plethora of sites that have not yet been excavated. There are over 5,000 ancient ruins in what are now Israel and Jordan, without counting sites in other areas of the ancient Near East world. Most of the Palestinian sites are tells, and of these only a few hundred have attracted excavators. Of the excavated sites, only about 30 can be considered major excavations; the remainder have consisted of small-scale soundings, emergency clearances, or salvage operations. It is important to keep in mind that even the major sites are only partially uncovered during the course of an excavation. It is apparent, then, that a very high percentage of the major ruins of Palestine remain untouched by any expedition. In other words, in comparison to the minuscule amount that has been recovered, a massive amount of information remains undiscovered, despite nearly a century of excavations.

2. An extenuating factor in biblical archaeology is the problem that many of the major excavations were carried out prior to 1936, before the development of some of the more sophisticated techniques which have become standard practice since the end of World War II. The results of earlier excavations may be suspect, therefore; and in some cases tells that were excavated, when excavation was in its infancy, have become the focus of recent re-excavations. Megiddo, Jericho, Shechem, and Gezer are among the sites that have been re-excavated in order to clarify the work of earlier excavators.

3. Another problem in archaeological research is the fact that, unlike chemistry or biology, the experiment cannot be repeated. Each archaeological site is unique; and once a part of the tell is disturbed, that part, that experiment, cannot be duplicated. Each site is unique even though there are some basic similarities in Palestinian tells in the same region. The condition of the layers of debris will depend upon whether they were laid down in peace or in war, and on whether they have been disturbed by subsequent inhabitants who dug pits, foundation trenches, silos, or reservoirs. Thus the condition of the occupational layers will determine whether the process of stratigraphic excavation will be simple or complex.

4. A final limitation is that too often too much has been expected from biblical archaeology, a relatively new discipline. By the very nature of the enterprise, data extracted from excavations can often be interpreted in a number of different ways and can be dated only within relative degrees of certainty. In spite of the progress made in excavation methods, archaeology still remains an inexact science. It may enlighten us, excite us, challenge us, even disturb us; but rarely, if ever, does it provide us with all the answers. Archaeology is simply one of the building blocks to be used in our quest for a more complete biblical understanding.