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BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Introduction

The field of biblical archaeology is flourishing today, with popular interest at an all-time high. Millions of viewers watch television documentaries on the Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, and the so-called Lost Tomb of Jesus. Major publishing houses have published competing Bible atlases, and the popularizing magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* reaches a large audience. And every year at Easter, Charlton Heston appears on television as Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie *The Ten Commandments*, raising his arms high to part the waters of the Red Sea so that the Hebrews may cross to safety.

Biblical archaeology is a subset of the larger field of Syro-Palestinian archaeology—which is conducted throughout the region encompassed by modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Specifically, it is archaeology that sheds light on the stories, descriptions, and discussions in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament from the early second millennium BCE, the time of Abraham and the Patriarchs, through the Roman period in the early first millennium CE.

Despite the fact that biblical archaeologists began their excavations in the Holy Land more than a hundred years ago—with a Bible in one hand and a trowel in the other—major questions still remain



1. Israel and Judah from 930 to 720 BCE.

unanswered, including whether there was really an exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt and the extent of David and Solomon's empires. Other unresolved issues involve the specific details of daily life during the period of the Divided Kingdoms, after the time of Solomon, and the difference between Canaanite and Israelite material culture during the Early Iron Age.

Most biblical archaeologists do not deliberately set out to either prove or disprove elements of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament through archaeology. Instead, they investigate the material culture of the lands and time periods mentioned in the Bible, and the people, places, and events discussed in those ancient texts, in order to bring them to life and to reconstruct the culture and history of the region. This is particularly evident in New Testament archaeology, where the excavation of cities like Caesarea, Capernaum, and Sepphoris has shed light on the social, religious, and geographic situation in the time before, during, and after the life of Jesus.

However, biblical archaeology has generally provided more relevant information that can be correlated with the narratives of the Hebrew Bible than with those of the New Testament. There are several reasons for this disparity. The events depicted in the Hebrew Bible occurred over a much longer time period than those depicted in the New Testament—over millennia rather than over approximately two hundred years. Moreover, the stories and events described in the Hebrew Bible occurred throughout a much larger geographic area than those of the New Testament. The entire Middle East and North Africa provide the backdrop for the stories of the Hebrews, whereas the drama of the early Christians played out mainly in Syro-Palestine and to a lesser extent in ancient Greece and Italy.

For these two reasons of space and time, there are many more potentially relevant Old Testament archaeological sites than New Testament sites. Perhaps of equal importance is the fact

that the Hebrew Bible often describes events such as battles and destructions, and solid structures such as buildings and inscriptions carved in stone. These leave behind physical remnants that tend to endure for long periods of time, whereas the narratives of the New Testament more often involved language and ideas that have enormous social impact but leave few physical artifacts that can be discovered by digging. Nonetheless, biblical archaeology has provided wonderful insights into both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, and correlations with both (see table 1, page 6).

For many scholars, the Bible is an important source of data that helps to shed light on ancient life and practices. Leaving aside for the moment the religious significance and the questions of the historical accuracy of the text, there is no question that the Bible is a historical document of seminal importance. It is an ancient source that often contains abundant details and descriptions of the Holy Land in antiquity. It is a source that can be used—with caution—to shed light on the ancient world, just as Syro-Palestinian archaeologists use Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, or Neo-Babylonian inscriptions covering the same time period.

This use of ancient sources by biblical archaeologists finds its parallel in the practices of Classical archaeologists who study the texts of the people who lived in ancient Greece and Italy and of New World archaeologists who can now read the texts of the pre-Columbian peoples of the Americas. Classical archaeologists sometimes compare their findings in the field to the Greek and Roman texts, in order to discuss questions such as the nature of the Periclean Building Program or about the plague that ravaged Athens in 430 BCE, while those specializing in the Bronze Age will cautiously use the Homeric texts. In a similar manner, biblical archaeologists often, and with appropriate care, compare their field findings to the biblical account in order to discuss questions concerning David, Solomon, the Divided Kingdoms, and so on.

What is not always known in advance, however, is the accuracy of the accounts either in the Bible or in the Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, or Neo-Babylonian inscriptions. This problem is not unique to biblical archaeology, for there is considerable variation in the accuracy of the descriptions of ancient Greece and Rome contained in the texts of Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, the Greek playwrights, the Roman authors, and the Roman historians. As classical scholars readily admit, some texts are more accurate than others. Not all can be used to verify data obtained from field excavations in the Aegean and western Mediterranean.

It is in the question of the historical accuracy of the texts where the interests of professional biblical archaeologists and the educated public overlap, for it is frequently the quintessential biblical questions—the ones that fueled the birth of the field—that still intrigue the public. Did Joshua capture Jericho? Was there someone named Abraham who wandered from Mesopotamia to Canaan? Did David and Solomon exist? Where was Jesus buried? Although biblical archaeology today is a far cry from what it was a hundred or more years ago—it is now more scientifically rigorous, and its practitioners have generally moved on to more anthropologically oriented topics—these basic questions still resonate. Unfortunately, answering them is not always easy.

Chapter 1

The nineteenth century: the earliest explorers

The first archaeological endeavors in the Holy Land were conducted not by archaeologists but by theologians, biblical scholars, and engineers primarily interested in locating places mentioned in the Bible and mapping the geography of the region. Although none of these men were trained archaeologists, they made important contributions to what would become the field of biblical archaeology.

Pride of place goes to the American minister Edward Robinson. While not the first person to begin working on biblical questions in Palestine (as it was known then), Robinson became the most prominent person of his era to do so. Born in Connecticut in 1794, he was an ordained Congregationalist minister as well as a biblical scholar and explorer. Combining his passions, he toured Palestine in 1838 accompanied by an American missionary named Eli Smith, who was fluent in Arabic. Their goal was to identify as many sites mentioned in the Bible as possible—in other words, to create a historical (and biblical) geography of Palestine. They did so primarily by matching the modern Arabic names to ancient Hebrew names, so that, for instance, they identified modern Beitān as ancient Bethel.

Robinson and Smith succeeded in identifying some one hundred biblical sites during their travels, though they had little more equipment than a compass, telescope, and measuring tapes, plus copies of the Bible in both English and Hebrew. The results of their initial explorations were published in three volumes just a few years later. Robinson returned to Palestine in 1852 and subsequently published another volume. In the course of his work, he not only identified dozens more biblical sites to his own satisfaction but a variety of other remnants from antiquity as well, including an arch at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which is still called Robinson's Arch.

Robinson's identifications were not always completely accurate, of course, nor did he succeed in locating all of the ancient sites for which he was searching. At one point, he stood atop Tell el-Mutesellim, a seventy-foot-tall mountain in the Jezreel Valley—which he did not recognize as being man-made—gazing out into the valley towards Mount Tabor and Mount Gilboa, wondering aloud where the famous site of Megiddo (biblical Armageddon) might be. He knew that it must be somewhere close, but it never dawned on him that he was actually standing on it at that very moment and that there were at least twenty different levels of habitation stacked one on top of another within the ancient mound underneath his feet. He was unable to locate either Jericho or Lachish for the same reason, for he never realized that the prominent tells dotting the landscape of the Holy Land were actually the remains of ancient sites.

Soon after Robinson's explorations, the British-based Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), founded in 1865, hired Charles Warren—a member of the British army who was later knighted and rose to the rank of major general—to explore and record the ancient features of Jerusalem. Beginning in 1867, Warren spent several years engaged in this work, studying the water system and other underground aspects of early Jerusalem. Warren's Shaft—a part of the underground water system of the early city—still bears his

name. Long thought to have played a role in David's capture of Jerusalem three thousand years ago, it has recently become clear that Warren's Shaft did not come into use until the eighth century BCE, well after the time of David.

The PEF funded surveys intended to map the geography of all of Palestine, for as the archbishop of York stated at the inaugural meeting of the PEF in 1865: "This country of Palestine belongs to you and to me, it is essentially ours. . . . We mean to walk through Palestine, in the length and breadth of it, because that land has been given unto us." Moreover, as he said by way of further explanation and justification, "If you would really understand the Bible . . . you must understand also the country in which the Bible was first written"—a cogent summary of the religious aspect of the motivation for the British.

The nineteenth century: the earliest explorers



2. Captain Charles Warren being presented with a book of Samaritan prayers for the archbishop of York by Yakub es Shellaby, head of the Samaritan community. Mount Gerizim, Nablus, 20 April 1867.

There were geopolitical motivations as well. The British were determined to conduct such surveys in the area before the French began to do so. They wished to have a firm grasp of the geography in order to have an advantage when the Ottoman Empire began its inevitable collapse. The British surveys of the 1870s, conducted by the Royal Engineers under the leadership of men such as Captain Charles Wilson, Lieutenant Claude Conder, and Lieutenant Horatio H. Kitchener, resulted in the mapping of virtually all of Palestine. Their work was published as twenty-six volumes of *Memoirs*, a huge map, architectural plans, and photographs.

The work was not easy, however, for the conditions were primitive, and many of the men suffered from malaria; some even died from it. At one point in 1875, while surveying near Safed, the survey team was attacked, and Conder and Kitchener were both badly injured, as were others in their party. The Ottoman authorities eventually captured those responsible and brought them to justice, but the damage had been done. The survey had a lasting impact on the region, which is still felt to the present day, for the modern border between Israel and Lebanon lies at the point where Conder and Kitchener stopped their work in the Upper Galilee.

In contrast to these American and British explorers and engineers, Charles Clermont-Ganneau, a Frenchman who was first sent to Palestine in 1867 to work for the French consulate, was more interested in ancient writings than in architecture or geography. As an epigrapher—a specialist in ancient inscriptions—his primary contribution was the identification of items such as the Mesha Inscription (also known as the Moabite Stone or Mesha Stele), dating to the ninth century BCE and discovered at Dibon in Jordan.

The inscription was commissioned by Mesha, the king of Moab, which at the time was a small kingdom on the eastern side of the Jordan River, in what is now the modern country of Jordan. The inscription, written on a black basalt stone measuring three feet

high by two feet wide and describing a victory by the Moabite king, is extremely significant for biblical archaeology, for it mentions “Omri, king of Israel.” Omri is known from the biblical account to have ruled over the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the ninth century BCE. The Mesha Stele is one of the first known extrabiblical inscriptions that names a person or place mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

On the stone, King Mesha lists the major accomplishments of his reign. He probably set up the inscription in connection with the establishment of a temple to the Moabite god Chemosh. Among the items that he mentions are his defeat of the Israelite army, which, according to the slightly different version in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 3:4–27), was led by King Jehoram, grandson of Omri of Israel. In particular, Mesha records his recovery of Moabite territory that had previously been seized by Israel. The relevant portion of the inscription reads:

I am Mesha . . . king of Moab, the Dibonite. My father reigned over Moab thirty years and I reigned after my father. And I built this high place for Chemosh . . . because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries. Omri, king of Israel, humbled Moab many days . . . but I have triumphed over him and over his house and Israel has perished for ever. Omri had conquered the land of Medeba and he ruled over it during his days and half the days of his son, forty years, but Chemosh returned it in my days.

The modern history of the inscription is fascinating. An Anglican medical missionary by the name of F. A. Klein was the first person to identify the inscription, in 1868. When Klein first saw it in the ruins of ancient Dibon, near the eastern side of the Dead Sea, it was intact. He offered the Bedouin tribesmen the equivalent of \$400 for the stone (to which they agreed), but then left it at the site. A year later, an attempt was made by an emissary of Charles Clermont-Ganneau to make a copy of the inscription, but his wet

paper tore into several pieces when he left hastily, fearing for his life when a quarrel erupted among the Bedouins.

The Ottoman authorities, who ruled the region, eventually attempted to seize the stone. However, the Bedouin tribesmen—who hated the Turkish governor—tossed the inscription into a large fire until the stone was red-hot and then poured cold water on it. It shattered into hundreds of small fragments, which the Bedouins put into their granaries to avoid handing them over to the authorities.

Eventually, Clermont-Ganneau was able to buy many of the broken pieces. Charles Warren bought a few more, and a German scholar named Konstantin Schlottmann bought yet more. In all, fifty-seven pieces, large and small, were purchased and approximately two-thirds of the original inscription was reconstructed, although it contained many gaps running through individual letters and even whole words. Even with part of the original inscription missing, it remains the longest monumental inscription ever discovered in the Holy Land.

The Mesha Inscription has long been considered important for its confirmation of the existence of the Israelite king Omri. However, the inscription may be even more significant than previously thought, for it may also contain a mention of the House of David (*Beit David*): “. . . And the house [of Da]vid dwelt in Horonên.”

Some years later, Clermont-Ganneau was also involved with another inscription written in early Hebrew. Now called the Siloam Inscription, it was found chiseled into the stone roof of a tunnel in Jerusalem and eventually taken to Istanbul. The tunnel had been dug in antiquity through nearly 1,800 feet of solid rock, from the Gihon Spring outside the city to a location inside called the Siloam Pool. Two boys playing in the tunnel in 1880 looked up at the roof and spied the inscription, which read:

While [...] were still [...] axe[s], each man toward his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be cut through, [there was heard] the voice of a man calling to his fellow, for there was an overlap in the rock on the right [and on the left]. And when the tunnel was driven through, the quarrymen hewed [the rock], each man toward his fellow, axe against axe; and the water flowed from the spring toward the reservoir for 1,200 cubits, and the height of the rock above the head[s] of the quarrymen was 100 cubits.

It seemed to Clermont-Ganneau and others that the inscription not only referred to the means by which the tunnel had been constructed but brought to life a passage from the book of 2 Kings in the Hebrew Bible. The passage describes the preparations made by King Hezekiah of Judah against the coming attack by Sennacherib and the Neo-Assyrians in 701 BCE: “The rest of the deeds of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah?” (2 Kings 20:20)

The defensive measures implemented by Hezekiah had apparently included digging a new tunnel in order to bring water into the city during a time of siege. A similar strategy had previously been employed at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer. Thus the Siloam Inscription not only confirmed a passage in the Hebrew Bible but also helped to explain the probable means by which the earlier water tunnels had been constructed during the Bronze Age at other sites in ancient Palestine.

Making use of all this new information was George Adam Smith, the last but arguably the greatest in the series of historical geographers who contributed to a knowledge of the Holy Land in the years when the discipline of biblical archaeology was in its infancy. Smith, a Scottish theologian born in Calcutta in 1856, is probably best known for his book *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (1894), an extremely thorough volume that updated

those published by Robinson and other earlier explorers. For instance, Smith was the first to correctly identify Tell el-Mutesellim as Megiddo, after Robinson and others had failed to do so.

Smith wrote his book after two visits to the Holy Land, the first in 1880, when he journeyed through the lands of “Judaea, Samaria, Esdraelon, and Galilee,” as he recorded in the preface to the first edition. The second visit was in 1891, when he explored more of the country and even ventured as far north as Damascus. Standing upon the shoulders of those who had gone before him, including Robinson, Conder, and Kitchener, all of whom he cited admiringly, Smith nevertheless ignored a number of their interpretations and contested a number more, as he noted. His aim was to “give a vision of the land as a whole . . . [and] to hear through it the sound of running history.”

Smith’s volume, which was a resounding success, was republished in a new edition virtually every year through 1931, constantly updated as new archaeological finds were made and new world events transpired. For instance, after General Edmund Allenby captured the site of Megiddo during World War I, Smith added into the 1931 edition an account and translation of the similar capture of Canaanite Megiddo in 1479 BCE by the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose III. According to one of Allenby’s biographers, Sir Archibald Wavell, Allenby had himself carried an earlier edition of Smith’s book with him while on his campaigns in Palestine, consulting both it and the Bible on an almost daily basis.

The work conducted by men like Smith, Conder, and Robinson set the stage for what was to come. Once the initial surveys of the geography of the Holy Land had been completed, the next step was to dig into the ground itself, in search of the ancient remains.