

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Ph.D.

top fifteen finds

from BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

It is difficult to reduce **several hundred** rather major archaeological finds to a mere 15 that top the list. Indeed, Michael D. Coogan attempted to list the “10 Great Finds” in the 20th anniversary issue of the magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* (BAR, vol. 21.3, May-June 1995, pp 36-47). Some of my top picks will coincide with his, but all 15 will be listed here because of the way each has affected the interpretation of Scripture. With some attention to their importance, I will list the 15 in order of greatest significance.



2 John Rylands Papyrus
The John Rylands Library,
University of Manchester,
Manchester, UK.

1 Ketef Hinnom Amulets

Pride of place no doubt belongs to the oldest Old Testament (#1) and oldest New Testament (#2) texts known to us at this time. The antiquity of the Old Testament text is witnessed by two silver amulets discovered underneath a rocky escarpment on which St. Andrews Church of Scotland stands, across the Hinnom Valley from the western walls of the old city of Jerusalem. They are known as the *Ketef Hinnom Amulets*, found in Cave 25 in 1979 by Gabriel Barkay.

These 7th to 6th Century B.C. silver plaques, rolled up to form two amulets (the larger measuring 4 inches by 1 inch, and the smaller, 1.5 by .5 inches), are inscribed with words from Numbers 6:24-26 on one, and Deuteronomy 7:9 on the other. Both match the Hebrew words found in the Pentateuch and have extraordinary correspondence to the wording and spelling of these Scriptures, which chal-

lenges those who give a Post-Exilic date for the Pentateuch to explain how two texts from the Law of Moses appeared so much earlier than the scholarly critical views have set for them!

2 John Rylands Papyrus

In a similar way, the *John Rylands Papyrus*, found by Grenfeld in Fayum, Egypt, in 1920, yielded the oldest known fragment of a New Testament manuscript. It was dated by papyrologists to 125 A.D. But since it was in circulation that far south into Egypt, this small scrap of papyrus with the verses from John's gospel (John 18:31-33; 37-38), successfully put an end to the then-popular attempt to late-date John's gospel away from the disciple John and put it instead at the end of the 2nd Century A.D. No longer was such a move possible in light of the archaeological evidence.

3 Dead Sea Scrolls

Probably the most sensational manuscript discovery of our times is the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. Found in 1948 in caves near the ruins of Qumran, a 1st Century B.C. Essene community located near the northwest

shore of the Dead Sea, these 1100 ancient documents and 100,000 fragments, plus several intact full scrolls, represent portions or the entire text of every Old Testament book in Hebrew except the book of Esther. Somewhere around 230 of the total manuscripts are copies of Old Testament books. Prior to their discovery, the oldest surviving manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible came from A.D. 920. Some copies of the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament dated back to the 3rd Century B.C., but up to that point none of the Hebrew manuscripts went back that far.

Now we had Hebrew Scriptures that could be dated in the 1st and even the 2nd Century B.C. Most amazingly, these Dead Sea Scrolls showed that our Bible had been preserved with dramatic accuracy for what was by now over two millennia. One copy of Isaiah, our best example, showed that after a gap of 1000 years in textual copying tradition, for what stretches to over 100 pages in our English Bibles, only three words in the whole book of Isaiah showed any difference—and those differences were variations in spelling comparable to the difference in English and American spellings of “honour” versus “honor.”

3 Temple Scroll from Qumran (on the cover)
Z. Radovan www.BibleLandPictures.com

4 Beni Hasan Painting

In a village called Beni Hasan, some 150 miles south of Cairo, on the east bank of the Nile River, an 8 foot long by 1^{1/2} foot high painting was found in an early 19th Century B.C. cave. Known as the *Beni Hasan Painting*, it depicts “Asiatics” (but more precisely, eight men, four women and three children, led by two Egyptian officials) entering Egypt to sell eye paint. The men wear multicolored long kilts that cover their chests and one shoulder, and have sandals on their feet. Each man has a full head of hair, a short beard, but no mustache.

Likewise, the women have multicolored garments, but these garments are much longer and have no fringes on the bottom. The women also wear a sort of slipper sock for footwear and a small headband on top of their heads of long hair.

Two donkeys, accompanied by an ibex and a gazelle, transport what are perhaps bellows on their backs. The men are equipped with what appear to be water-skins, a musical instrument (lyre?), and weaponry of spears and bows and arrows. The kilts of many colors remind us of Joseph’s coat (Gen 37:3; cf 2 Sam 13:18), and provide a picture

as to what the Patriarchal culture and its economic and political contacts with Egypt may have looked like. It is a fascinating picture of life about the time of the Patriarchs.

5 Basalt Stelae from Dan

The *Basalt Stelae* from Dan, found in 1993 and 1994 with the words “house of David,” gave us the first external evidence to the Bible of the reality of King David’s existence. Previous to this, it had been fashionable to dismiss the David narratives

in the Bible as so much priestly propaganda that had tried to give Israel a respectable past history as they sat in the Babylonian captivity. Avraham Biran, of the Hebrew Union College, excavating a site in northern Israel known as Dan, found in an exposed wall of stones one basalt fragment about 12 inches high. In the same wall a year later, two other smaller pieces were found to be part of the original inscription. When the Aramaic words were translated from the paleo-Hebrew script, here was the first extra-biblical reference to King David.

This announcement caused scholars to take another look at a basalt stone known as the *Mesha Stele*, from the Moabite King Mesha, that had been found a century earlier. This text complained about “Omri, King of Israel,” who had oppressed the kingdom of Moab, a land east of the Dead Sea

named after the principal character, King Gilgamesh, who was alleged to have ruled the Babylonian city of Uruk around 2600 B.C. This epic, written in Semitic wedge-shaped letters known as cuneiform Akkadian, has many striking similarities to the biblical story of Noah in Genesis 6-9, as well as just as many substantial differences. While Austen Henry Layard uncovered literally tens of thousands of tablets in Nineveh, which he shipped back to England up to 1851, it was George Smith, an assistant to the British Museum’s Assyrian department, who in 1872 discovered tablet 11 related to a flood story. Since the tablet was broken, Smith returned to Nineveh and within five days, on May 14, 1873, found another tablet with the missing lines.

In the Akkadian epic, Gilgamesh is told about the flood by a man named Utnapishtim.



4 Beni Hasan Painting
Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY



5 Basalt Stelae from Dan
Z. Radovan www.BibleLandPictures.com



6 Gilgamesh Epic
Dr. James C. Martin, Preserving Bible Times

and Jordan River (1 Kings 16:21-27). In a partially broken line of the *Mesha Inscription*, a French

scholar named Andre LeMaire supplied two missing letters of the original five Hebrew letters so as to be able to now read the “House of David.” Thus, the stele told how Mesha threw off the yolk that the house of David had imposed on Moab years previously (LeMaire, “The House of David...” BAR, 1994, pp. 30-37). Now we had two external references to a David that some claimed never existed.

6 Gilgamesh Epic

Tablet 11 of the 12-tablet story called the *Gilgamesh Epic* is another flood story

He had safely passed through a flood because a creator god named Ea had warned him that a flood was coming and he was to build a boat (as was the biblical Noah, Gen 6:2, 13-17). The storm that wiped out the rest of mankind ended on the seventh day and all emerged from the boat on the twelfth day (contrary to Gen 7:24). Utnapishtim’s boat rested on Mount Nisirin Kurdistan (rather than the Biblical Mt. Ararat in Turkey), as Utnapishtim sent out a dove, a swallow and finally, a raven (cf. Gen 8:3-11). When the raven failed to return, all left the Babylonian boat and offered a sacrifice to the gods (cf. Gen 8:12-22). Both accounts seem to reflect a similar event, but the *Gilgamesh Epic* has numerous legendary additions with a tone that is vastly different from the biblical account.



7 Pool of Gibeon
Dr. James C. Martin, Preserving Bible Times

7 Pool of Gibeon

The site of the *Pool of Gibeon*, mentioned in 2 Samuel 2:13 and Jeremiah 41:12, was first identified by Edward Robinson in 1833 at the Palestinian village of el-Jib. James B. Pritchard excavated here in 1956-1960 and confirmed this identification with 31 jar handles with the Hebrew word for Gibeon on them. Apparently, Gibeon was a producer and exporter of wines, which required special provisions of water, since the summer months lacked any rainfall. Pritchard found two separate water systems: (1) a pool or reservoir measuring 37 feet in diameter, and (2) a tunnel that sloped down from inside the city walls to a water chamber just outside the city at the base of the tell.

The Gibeon Pool was cut through limestone bedrock to a depth of 82 feet to the water level, with a staircase and railing cut into the limestone winding down 37 feet to a level floor about halfway down. From there the stairs drop straight down another 45 feet to the water table. It was around this pool that 12 of King David's men, under commander Joab, met 12 of King Saul's men, under commander Abner, in a wrestling contest in which all 24 died as they grabbed each other by the hair and plunged a sword into one another.

8 The Seal of Baruch

The *Seal of Baruch* was one of the 250 inscribed bullae, or small clay baked buttons, that turned up in 1975 through an Arab East Jerusalem antiquities dealer. While they must have come from illegal digging in Jerusalem, they are important because they were originally meant to seal documents or containers to prevent tampering. A lump of soft clay, attached to a sealing string, was stamped with a seal and left to harden. Most of the documents and containers, to which many of these were attached, were destroyed in a fire, but the bullae survived and were preserved by the fire all the more. Among them was a seal containing this name, "Berekhayahu [Ba-

rch] son of Neriyahu [Neriah] the scribe" (Jer 36: 4, 8, 14; 45:1). The suffix on both names, yahu, is a shortened form of Yahweh or Jehovah. This Baruch was none other than the confidant and personal scribe of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah who took dictation from the prophet and had to hide with Jeremiah as King Jehoiakim sought to arrest both of them (Jer 36:26).

Another bulla in this same lot contained the name of Ishmael, who assassinated Gedaliah (Jer 40: 7), the governor appointed by the Babylonians after Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C. An additional 51 bullae were found on the floor of the House of Bullae. Among the names recorded there was a bulla of "Gemaryahu [Gemariah] the son of Shaphan," a scribe who served in the court of King Jehoiakim and who advised the king not to burn the scroll Jeremiah had written (Jer 36:10-12, 25-26). Almost 400 of these bullae have been found belonging to the period of the 8th to the 6th Century B.C.



9 Winged Bull with Human Head, Palace of Sargon II
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

9 King Sargon II of Assyria

One of the persons named in the Scriptures, but whose existence was doubted until modern Biblical Archaeology "discovered" him, is *King Sargon II of Assyria*. Isaiah 20:1 was sure he was the King of Assyria, but he was not among those found in the excavations of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. However, in 1843, Paul Emile Botta discovered that Sargon had gone to Dur-Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad), a virgin site some 12 miles northeast of Nineveh, where he began construction in 717 B.C. Stretching one mile on each side, this construction site was never completed or occupied before Sargon died, and was abandoned by his successors. A massive 25 ton bull-man-god was one of several that guarded the entrance to the throne room at Khorsabad.

10 Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III

The *Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III*, standing 6 feet 6 inches high, was found at the Northwest palace at Nimrud commemorating Shalmaneser's campaigns during his reign. On the second panel from the top, King Jehu of Israel (2 Kings 10:34) can be seen kneeling before Shalmaneser (known from elsewhere to have taken place in the year of 841 B.C.). This monument is of enormous historical value, for it is the only secular piece of evidence where a historical personage of Scripture is depicted. The inscription below the depiction reads: "the tribute of Jehu (Ia-w-a), son of Omri (Hu-um-ri); I received from him silver, gold, a golden saplu-bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king, [and] wooden puruhtu."



10 Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III
Dr. James C. Martin, Preserving Bible Times

11 Caiaphas Ossuary

The High Priest Caiaphas, who served as the leader of the Sanhedrin from A.D. 18-36, is known as the one who gave cynically expedient advice that it was better for one man (i.e., Jesus) to die than for the whole nation to suffer (John 11: 49-53). Indeed, it was he who later presided over the late-night trial of Jesus (John 18:14). In what some considered to be the courtyard of Caiaphas' house, where Peter waited for news about Jesus (Matt 26:69-75), the *Caiaphas Ossuary*, or bone chest, was found by accident in 1990 south of the Temple Mount as workers were building a water park in Jerusalem's Peace Forest.

Inscribed on the ornately decorated bone chest or ossuary was the inscription found in two places, "Qafa" and "Yehosef bar Qayafa," i.e., "Caiaphas," and "Joseph,

11 Caiaphas Ossuary
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem



son of Caiaphas.” The historian Josephus gives his full name as “Joseph, who is called Caiaphas of the high priesthood.” Inside the ossuary were the bones of six people, including one 60-year-old man, probably Caiaphas. This was a remarkable discovery.

12 Pontius Pilate Inscription

The *Pontius Pilate Inscription* is a first century monument that was re-used in a fourth-century remodeling project. But it would seem that it was written to commemorate Pilate’s dedication of a temple to worship Tiberias Caesar during Pilate’s term of rule in Judea. Pontius Pilate ruled over Judea from A.D. 26-36. It was during this time that he met with Jesus of Nazareth in that famous encounter where Pilate asked, “What is truth?” (John 18:36-37). The Latin inscription of four lines gave Pilate the title of “Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea,” a title reminiscent of the one given to him in Luke 3:1, “Pontius Pilate, Governor of Judea.” Once again, here was external evidence from archaeology showing that the gospel record was written during the time in which the events took place, for titles such as these tend to be forgotten in later times.



12 Pilate Inscription
Gary D. Pratico

13 Pool of Siloam

The pool where Jesus healed the blind man (John 9:1-41), was the *Pool of Siloam*. In the Byzantine period, Empress Eudocia (c. 400-460 A.D.) built a church (over which now sits a



13 Pool of Siloam
Hershel Shanks, Biblical Archaeology Society

mosque), and a pool where the water emerges from Hezekiah’s tunnel. Hezekiah, king of Judah during the time of an expected Assyrian siege, had long ago constructed a 1750 foot long tunnel from the Gihon Spring, where two teams of workers coming from opposite ends of the tunnel somehow mysteriously met deep underground in the middle—a feat commemorated by a plaque called the Siloam Inscription (now housed in the Istanbul Museum). The water flowed from Hezekiah’s tunnel to the Pool of Siloam (Isa 8:6; Neh 3:15 Shiloah = Siloam).

In June of 2004, however, it became clear that the Byzantine site of the fourth Christian century was not the site of the Pool of Siloam of Jesus’ day. As workers were called to repair a sewer pipe in Jerusalem, archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron noticed a segment of descending stairways of five steps each, not far from the end of Hezekiah’s tunnel, measuring 225 feet on one side. Using a metal detector, the archaeologists discovered four coins in the plaster used in the first phase of the pool dated to the late Hasmonean period or early Herodian times (103-37 B.C.). In the second phase, a dozen coins dating to the period of the first Jewish Revolt, which lasted from 66-70 A.D., were found with the years 2, 3, and 4 of the revolt on them. There is little doubt that this was the Pool of Siloam where Jesus sent the blind man to wash so that he could be healed (John 9:1-12; BAR, 2005, 31.5, pp. 16-23).

14 Beersheba Horned Altar

At the southern limits of ancient Israel (“from Dan to Beersheba”) was found at Beersheba a number of large, carefully dressed stones that had been re-used in a wall dating to the late 8th Century B.C. The *Beersheba Horned Altar*, when reconstructed, measured 63 inches high, 63 inches long and 63 inches wide, though more stones found later suggest it may have been closer to 9 feet. The tapered projections or “horns” (as in Exodus 29: 2 or 1 Kings 1:51; 2:28) fit the biblical description of an altar, but the hewn stones were not according to biblical instructions (Exodus 20:25). Also, the altar had a serpent inscribed on one of its stones and sacrifices had been offered on it, for its top stones were blackened. While there has been a huge controversy over the original location of the altar, all agree it gives us a good picture of an illegitimate place of sacrifice. In fact, Amos 5:5; 8:14 appear to say that Beersheba was a seat of pagan worship, where a schismatic sanctuary may have at one time stood.

14 Beersheba Horned Altar
Z. Radovan www.BibleLandPictures.com



15 Cyrus Cylinder

For our final selection of this large number of finds reflecting on the reliability of the Bible’s witness to its historical accuracy, we have chosen the *Cyrus Cylinder*. This cylindrical shaped record of the Persian king’s edicts matches quite



15 Cyrus Cylinder
Dr. James C. Martin, Preserving Bible Times

well with what we find in the books of Ezra (1:2-4) and 2 Chronicles (36:22-23). King Cyrus credits his god Marduk with selecting him and giving him the task of ruling the world. The prophet Isaiah would see it in slightly different theological terms, for in Isaiah 45:1 God called Cyrus by name long before he was born and destined him to “perform all [God’s] desire” (Isa 44:28). But even more significantly, the cylinder announces the Persian policy of Cyrus toward captive peoples, such as the exiled Israelites. All those exiled peoples would be allowed to return to their homelands where permanent sanctuaries would be established for them. That also accords with the Isaianic prophecy in Isaiah 44:24-28.

There is much more to tell, of course, but the preceding 15 samples should have helped make the case that Biblical Archaeology is alive and well. It has served wonderfully well as an interpretive tool by setting the scene, customs, culture and details of the times in which each find was located. However, an unexpected surprise has been how unwittingly it has also served apologetically in defense of the Scriptures, even if that had not been its motivating force or its primary objective. In fact, the results continue to roll in right up to the present moment, and some may have occurred while we were going to press with this article.

Dr. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., is President and Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. An internationally recognized Old Testament scholar, Dr. Kaiser continues his classroom teaching and is a popular Bible preacher and teacher at churches and conferences throughout the U.S. and abroad. He has authored over 30 books, among them, *Revive Us Again: Biblical Insights for Encouraging Spiritual Renewal, Toward An Old Testament Theology* and *A History of Israel*.