

what good is **BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY** to **Bible Readers?**

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the southwest corner of the Temple Mount and found a huge stone arch (now known as Robinson's Arch) attached to the large retaining wall of the mount.

But archaeology took on a life of its own when Sir Flinders Petrie, an Egyptologist and British archaeologist, began excavating Tell el-Hasi in the Negev desert south of

Archaeology, William Foxwell Albright (1891-1971), a professor of Semitic languages at Johns Hopkins University. Just as illustrious was the work of Rabbi Nelson Glueck (1900-1971), a U.S. archaeologist and President of Hebrew Union College from 1947 to 1971. Albright used archaeology to challenge some aspects of the documentary theory, a popular view of the famous German literary critic, Julius Wellhausen, who taught that there was no real history in the Bible until the time of the post-Exilic

period of Haggai and Malachi. Following his line of reasoning, Noah, all the patriarchs, Joshua, David, all the kings of Israel and Judah, not to mention the exodus, conquest, and captivities, were historically without any support in reality.

Albright and Glueck led an older generation



So tell me: Did the biblical writers think they were telling the truth, i.e., the story as it really happened? Or, instead of giving us a “narrative history,” did the writers of Scripture have some genuine sources and facts, but they manipulated them and, thus, gave us well-intentioned propaganda, a sort of “historicized myth?” Which is correct?

To help answer this question, a relatively new science entered the scene in the mid-1880s—Biblical Archaeology. Two Americans, a noted geographer named Edward Robinson, and a Yale graduate and Congregational minister named Eli Smith, together identified more than 100 biblical sites, using topographical surveys and some limited excavation. In particular, Robinson created a sensation when he excavated

Jerusalem in the beginning 1890s. Petrie established the use of stratigraphy and ceramic typology to enable excavators to determine a relative chronology. Petrie analyzed the manmade layers of human debris to set a context for any artifacts and ruins found. He also used the broken shards of pottery, of which there was a super abundance on each site, to give a relative sequence of time, for pottery styles had a tendency to change as much as current day dress fashions or car models, and “dishes” in those days broke as easily (if not more so) than today. Thus, there were thousands of shards in every tell (archaeological site).

But the young science of Biblical Archaeology waited for the arrival in the 1920s of one who would later be called the Dean of American Biblical

of Biblical Archaeologists. While neither would subscribe to a view of biblical inerrancy, Glueck would famously say: “...it may be stated categorically that no archeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference” (Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, 1959, p. 31). Likewise, Albright wrote, “Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details of the Bible as a source of history” (W.F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, 1954 edition, p. 128).

But things were beginning to change. For example, two archaeologists from the same family, Sir Frederic George Kenyon (1863-1952) and his daughter, Kathleen Kenyon (1906-1978), both became renowned British archaeologists. The father was trained as a

New Testament Greek and classicist scholar, while his daughter majored in modern history and field archaeology. F. G. Kenyon's book, *The Bible and Archaeology* (1940) found that archaeology corroborated the history of the Bible; but his daughter seldom relied on any evidence from the biblical text, and argued against its history, especially the fall of Jericho.

Why did this change occur? Modernity incorrectly concluded that Biblical Archaeology had a "fundamentalist agenda" to validate the historicity of the narrative in the Bible. Moreover, a famous principle was stated in 1974 that the materials of archaeology should not be evaluated on the basis of written texts such as the Bible. Thus, Biblical Archaeology began to fade as a discipline in many quarters, to be replaced by regional study now known as Syro-Palestinian Archaeology. Accordingly, somewhere in the 1970s archaeology was no longer connected in many quarters

data of faith" (G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts*, 1952, p. 38 and p. 126f). This was not to "prove" one's faith by archaeology or history, but it did argue that the difference between folly and faith was clear: folly was trusting something when there was no basis for doing so, while faith was trusting on the basis of adequate evidence or fact.

In light of the continuing discoveries of artifactual material, and especially the thousands of ancient written texts on clay tablets, monuments, ostraca, parchments and papyri, it is becoming more and more difficult to declare, as some want to do, the failure of archaeology as an interpretive tool that had so often supplied exactly what was needed for modern readers to appreciate the contextual settings, preferred textual readings, and validity of the events of the narratives that carry the message of the gospel.

It is rather amusing to hear such serious declamations as: "King David is

talked, for the first time in any archaeological find, about the "house of David." Moreover, the additional fragments made it clear that the Syrian king Hazael of Aram fought against King Ahaziah of Judah and King Jehoram of Israel, a battle scholars now believe is the one described in 2 Chronicles 22:5.

Here is just one example of how a serendipitous find can have such powerful bearing on illuminating the biblical text. It can also obliterate proud boasts to the contrary in one fell swoop, even though the mission of Biblical Archaeology is not to prove or disprove the Bible. Our attitude as believers must be the same as the system of American jurisprudence that says the text is innocent until proven guilty! We must start by taking the Bible on its own terms and learn that the main criterion between real historians and myth-makers is to determine what were the writer's truth-intentions or straightforward assertions. Then, wherever we have the



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to the Bible; the new archaeology now was a secular science with little or no attention to the Scriptures. Truth in religion, it was affirmed in this postmodern thought, was now independent of the facts, events and persons in history, as well as independent of the Bible.

Two of Albright's students, George Ernest Wright (1909-1974) and John Bright (1908-1995), seemed to notice what was coming in the 1970s and tried to show the importance of the factuality of the major events in the Bible. Wright warned that we should pay "close attention to the facts of [biblical] history because these facts are the facts of God." "Now in Biblical faith everything depends upon whether the central events actually occurred.... [W]e must indeed take history seriously as the primary

a mere legend invented just as other biblical stories were." "David is as historical as King Arthur of the Round Table Knights." And then to learn that on July 21, 1993, just as Israeli archaeologists were concluding their work for the day on the Israelite city of Dan in upper Galilee, Gila Cook, a team surveyor, noticed an unusual shadow in a part of a recently exposed wall. On examining the flat basalt stone, she saw what looked like Aramaic letters. Immediately she called over the team leader, Avraham Biram of the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, and he exclaimed, "We have an inscription."

A year later, two additional fragments of what turned out to be a *stela* were found to fit together with the basalt stone. The inscription on the first stone

occasional archaeological find to help us validate the setting, we can learn once again that the writers of Scripture did tell the truth. ♦

Photos courtesy of Gary D. Pratico



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