

ARCHAEOLOGY IN GENESIS

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OBST 605 GENESIS

MARK D. HARRIS

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LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Archaeology in the Bible	5
Archaeology and Genesis	6
Creation in the Bible and the Ancient Near East	9
The Garden of Eden	10
The Fall	11
The Flood	11
The Ages of People	12
The Origins of Israel	13
Conclusion	15
Bibliography	16

Introduction

In gratitude for the Emancipation Proclamation, a delegation of African Americans came to the White House in September 1864 to present a Bible to President Abraham Lincoln. After receiving the gracious gift, Lincoln replied

“In regards to this great Book (the Bible), I have but to say it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good the Savior gave to the world was communicated through this Book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man's welfare, here and hereafter, are found portrayed in it.”¹

By contrast, the eminent Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins characterized religion as the enemy of truth.² Was Lincoln right in his high esteem of the Bible, or was Dawkins right in his disparagement of religion that comes from it?

Most people, if they consider where knowledge comes from at all, think that science is the only source of objective, reliable knowledge. Scientific knowledge must be accessible to our senses, must be reproducible by others at different times and in different places, and must be more or less predictable by “natural laws”. Many do not understand that science cannot speak to questions not accessible to our senses (however augmented by technology), to events that preceded the universe, or to issues involving morals, emotions, and other things that comprise the immaterial world.

History also cannot be proven by scientific experimentation. Empirical science has no way of proving the existence of people, places or events of the past. How can one design an

¹ Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*(Grand Rapids: Regency, 1965), 18.

² Wayne Jackson, "Richard Dawkins: Enemy of Truth" <http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/288> (accessed June 11 2011).

experiment to prove the existence of Napoleon and the events of Waterloo? To gain knowledge of the past people need to use information derived from the testimony of others, such as documents, and the lives of others, such as artifacts. Each piece of information enables researchers to develop a picture of the past. Scholars have greater confidence in these historical conclusions when evidence comes from multiple sources, contemporary sources, sources from all sides of the issue, and confirmation with archeological, documentary and other forms of evidence.

Evangelical believers hold that God makes Himself known through His creation (General Revelation), which is subject to scientific inquiry, and His inspired word, the Bible (Special Revelation), which is subject to historical inquiry. The key question for historical inquiry is whether the Bible is a valid historical document.

Some believe that it is not. When suing the Lee County Florida school district for offering a course on “The Bible as History”, American Civil Liberties Union Executive Director for Florida, Howard Simon stated “Whether Bible stories are the ‘gospel truth’ is a matter of faith, not literal history”.³ Others believe that it is. Dr Clifford Wilson, formerly director of the Australian Institute of Archaeology, wrote “I know of no finding in archaeology that’s properly confirmed which is in opposition to the Scriptures. The Bible is the most accurate history textbook the world has ever seen.”⁴ Sir Nelson Glueck, a renowned Jewish archaeologist wrote

³ "Florida Citizens Challenge Unconstitutional "Bible History" Classes", <http://www.aclu.org/ReligiousLiberty/ReligiousLiberty.cfm?ID=9406&c=29> (accessed June 11 2011).

⁴ "Archaeologist Speaks Out", <http://www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v21/i1/speak.asp> (accessed June 11 2011).

“It may be stated categorically that no archeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference.”⁵

This paper will review the archaeology of the Book of Genesis to determine if it is, by a preponderance of evidence, a valid historical document or not. My thesis is that it is.

Archaeology in the Bible

Archaeology, the study of ancient things, especially cultures and societies, is a key discipline in helping modern man understand the past, including the Bible.⁶ Archaeology combines the historical discovery of the past with meticulous scientific analysis.⁷ Religious adherents, whether Christians, Muslims, Jews, or others, often use archaeology to try to prove the tenets and events of their faith, but it is important to realize that while archaeology may be able to prove an event to be historical, it cannot prove that a book is divinely inspired nor can it prove the miraculous.⁸ For Christians, archaeology is most useful to provide context to Biblical stories, complement information found in Scriptures, challenge erroneous interpretations of the Bible, and demonstrate the historicity of events described therein.⁹

At the most basic level, the Bible clearly meets the historical validity test. Unlike most religious texts such as the Koran, the Hindu Veda, the Buddhist Scriptures (including the Tipitaka, the Kalama Suta, and others), the Bible makes clear historical claims. It is set in a known portion of the world, the lands surrounding the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia and

⁵ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 61.

⁶ James Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible*(Oxford: Lion Hudson PLC, 2008), 12.

⁷ Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice*(London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 9-10.

⁸ Hoffmeier, 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

features groups of people alive today, including the Jews, the Egyptians, the Arabs, and even the Assyrians. Over 25,000 manuscripts and manuscript portions exist, and they are written in languages known to the ancient world and verified by hundreds of secular documents and artifacts.¹⁰ By contrast, there are 643 manuscripts of the Iliad (written 800 BC), the earliest from 400 BC, 10 manuscripts of Caesar's Gallic wars (written c 50 BC), the oldest from the 9th Century, and 20 manuscripts of Livy's history of Rome (written c 50 BC), but none earlier than 4th Century.¹¹

The abundance of manuscripts and these secular confirmations of peoples and places in the Bible are heartening to Christians as they provide important evidence of the historical accuracy of the book. However, other peoples and places recorded in Scriptures are not confirmed by independent sources, and doubters use this lack of confirmation to argue against the Bible's historicity just as believers use whatever confirmation is available to argue for it.

Archaeology and Genesis

The Book of Genesis provides the setting of the Bible and is a cornerstone to understanding it. If Genesis is a valid historical document, the rest of the Bible is likely to be trustworthy. If it is not, the reliability of the rest of Scriptures is placed into doubt.

As with the Bible as a whole, the Book of Genesis clearly meets the most basic historical validity test. The writer of the Genesis clearly intended his readers to understand that he was writing history. Many of the places mentioned, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (Genesis 2:14),

¹⁰ McDowell, 34, 71-3.

¹¹ Ibid., 38.

the mountains of Ararat (Genesis 8:4), the cities of Ur,¹² Ninevah^{13, 14} and Haran¹⁵ (Genesis 11:28-31), the desert of the Negev (Genesis 13:1) and river of Egypt (Genesis 15:18) all either currently exist or were well known in antiquity during the time of Genesis. Many of the people groups are also well attested in history, including the Elamites (Genesis 14:1),¹⁶ Amorites (Genesis 10:16),¹⁷ and Hittites (Genesis 23:10).¹⁸

¹² Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (London: Equinox Publishing, 1990), 101.

¹³ Renfrew and Bahn, 28.

¹⁴ Roaf, 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

As with the Bible, although there is much in Genesis that is confirmed by secular sources, there is much that remains unconfirmed. One would think, for example, that there would be some mention somewhere of the battle described in Genesis 14, in which five kings rebelled against four kings, but as of yet there is little extra-Biblical evidence of that event. Even the kings involved have not been definitively identified.¹⁹ Furthermore, there is no firm contemporary extra-Biblical evidence, such as documents referring to them, that any of the Genesis patriarchs even existed. On first glance this would suggest that while the setting of the Bible may be accurate, the actual stories were myths or legends without historical basis. Before concluding this, however, there are important things to consider.

Genesis begins at creation, long before the beginning of history, continues to the time of Abraham (c 2000 BC) and ends with the death of Joseph (c 1800 BC). Only certain types of materials survive that long.

Table 1 – Survival of materials in the environment²⁰

Substance	Percent expected survival of the material compared to stone	
	Drylands	Wetlands
Stone	100	100
Flint	100	100
Bronze	75	90
Glass	75	75
Pottery	75	75
Bone	60	60
Iron	30	30
Wood	15	75
Plants	10	75
Skin	10	65
Basketry	5	60
Textiles	5	30

¹⁹ Walter C. Jr. Kaiser and others, "Book Excerpt: Does Archaeology Support Bible History?" <http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/1423-5.php> (accessed June 12 2011).

²⁰ Renfrew and Bahn, 58.

Abraham left the marshes of Mesopotamia early in his adult life and lived primarily in the dry lands of Canaan. Isaac, Jacob, and his sons lived in the same area. Furthermore, they were wandering tribesmen who would have had few possessions compared to their city dwelling counterparts. Those possessions that they had would have been light; more likely wood and basketry than stone. As important as they are to Muslims, Christians and Jews, none of the patriarchs was a king, prince, or other top tier person in his day. As a result, researchers should not expect to find much documentation or many artifacts of their lives.

This expectation is corroborated by the facts of what has survived in Palestine. The Sumerian King list from the second millennium BC is written on a fired clay tablet.²¹ Hammurabi's stela (1792-1750 BC) was etched on stone.²² The story of Sinuhe from 1800 BC is one of the few papyrus artifacts that survived the millennia.²³ Given these caveats, there is much in archaeology that provides insights on God's word in Genesis.

Creation in the Bible and the Ancient Near East

Contrary to the belief of many, the Genesis account of creation is not the earliest cosmogenic account in history. The Babylonian Enuma Elish (early second millennium BC) and the Egyptian Memphite Theology (about 2400 BC) predate Genesis, assuming Moses wrote it in about 1400 BC, by 500 to 1000 years. Though the differences in the creation accounts are myriad, the similarities are important as well.

²¹ Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 150.

²² *Ibid.*, 111.

²³ "Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection Berlin", <http://www.egyptian-museum-berlin.com/c54.php> (accessed June 12 2011).

Table 2 – Comparison of Creation accounts²⁴

	Genesis Account	Enuma Elish	Egyptian (Memphite Theology, Pyramid Text)
God	There is a single God who existed before time, space and matter. He has no female counterpart.	There are many gods come into existence at various times. Many have a female counterpart	Many gods and goddesses created by the creator god, Ptah
Chaos	No primordial battle with chaos. God controls everything, even the waters of chaos, by His will	Primordial battle with chaos, Marduk vs. Tiamat	
Matter	Created by God ex nihilo	Preexistent with the gods	
Man	Created to serve God, but not because He had needs. Made to exercise dominion over the rest of creation	Created to dig irrigation canals and do slave labor because the minor deities got tired of doing it.	Humans formed from the tears of the sun god, Re, weeping from loneliness
Creation	God speaks and the world comes into existence and is given function		Ptah thinks and speaks and the world comes into existence
After	God is pleased with what He has made.		Ptah is pleased with what he has made.

The effect of these similarities and differences is to make some believe that the Genesis account is derived from the earlier accounts and make others believe that the Biblical account was written to contrast the key points about Jehovah with the other ancient near eastern traditions.

The Garden of Eden

As noted earlier, the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers are well known. The Pishon River is unknown but it was said to flow through Havilah (northern Arabia) where there is gold (Genesis 2:11-12). Photographs of the Middle East taken by the Space Shuttle Endeavor in 1994 demonstrated traces of a defunct river that flowed from the Hijaz Mountains near Medina in

²⁴ Hoffmeier, 33-4.

Saudi Arabia, a land famous for its gold, to the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in modern Kuwait.²⁵ It dried up in about 3500 to 2000 BC.²⁶

The Fall

In the Gilgamesh Epic, the hero King Gilgamesh learns of a plant that can bring back one's youth. He is able to obtain a sprig of the plant but while he is resting a snake comes and steals the plant, denying him eternal life.²⁷ This story's commonalities with Genesis suggest either that one comes from the other, or more likely, that they both come from a common source.

The Flood

There are two Sumerian flood stories that are similar to the Genesis account of the Flood, the Zuisudra myth²⁸ and the Gilgamesh Epic.²⁹ Like the creation accounts, both have similarities and differences with the Genesis story.

²⁵ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, ed. Terry Mack, The Niv Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 169.

²⁶ Hoffmeier, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁸ Arnold and Beyer, 13-4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-70.

Table 3 – Comparison of the Flood Accounts^{30, 31}

	Genesis Account	Sumerian Accounts
Reason	God would destroy all mankind because of their wickedness	Gods would destroy all mankind because the noise of man interrupted the sleep of the gods.
Means	The hero, Noah, was to build a boat 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet deep with a flat bottom and a displacement of about 43,000 tons	The hero, Utnapishtim, built a cube or ziggurat-shaped boat 180 feet on all sides with a displacement of about 120,000 tons.
Who was saved	Noah, because he was righteous	Utnapishtim, because the god Ea warned him
Birds	Used to see if the flood waters have receded	Used to see if the flood waters have receded
Aftermath	Noah sacrificed to the Lord for saving him and his family	The gods regretted killing man because they were hungry and there was no one to feed them. When Utnapishtim sacrificed, they “crowded around like flies”.

The Genesis story makes more intuitive sense, portrays God in a more realistic light, and is rings true to scientific inquiry. For example, the Utnapishtim boat is totally impractical as a vessel, the kind of thing a kindergartener might design. Noah’s Ark meets realistic nautical specifications; the dimensions are similar to the *SS Great Eastern*, the boat which laid the first North Atlantic cable in 1866.³²

The Ages of People

The long lives noted for early man in Genesis are similar to but much shorter than the length of lives and reigns in the Sumerian King List, which records regents reigning for 21,000

³⁰ Tremper Longman, *How to Read Genesis*(Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2005), 82-7.

³¹ Walton, 313-338.

³² Francis A. Schaffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*(Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1972), 136.

to 64,000 years.³³ While this obviously does not prove that people lived that long in antiquity, it does suggest that such ideas were not unique to the writer of Genesis.

The Origins of Israel

As noted above, it is not likely that scholars will discover much hard extra-Biblical evidence for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, their names are Semitic, not Sumerian, suggesting that Abram's (as he was originally called) ancestors may have come to Mesopotamia during the Amorite migration starting about 2100 BC.³⁴ Their return to Haran (Genesis 11:31) would then have been a return to their ancestral homeland, as may be implied in Genesis 12:1.

The second millennium story of Sinuhe, who fled from Egypt to Canaan after Pharaoh Amenemhet I died, provides insight into how people in Canaan lived at the time of the patriarchs. Though the Egyptians historically despised the tent-dwelling Semites, the story is positive, reflecting his experience living in a tent encampment, eating a varied and healthy diet, and marrying the daughter of a local chieftain with whom he had found favor.³⁵ A scene on the tomb of Khnumhotep II illustrates a group of Semitic traders from Canaan arriving in Egypt in 1862 BC. It provides valuable insight into the dress, hairstyles and means of travel that would probably have been familiar to Abram's family.³⁶ Information on tribal alliances around 1750 BC, found in the archives at Mari, can surely reveal pertinent aspects of Abram's alliances with Amorite chieftains Aner, Eshcol and Mamre (Genesis 14:13). Finally, a comprehensive study of over 6000 Western Semitic names revealed that names beginning with I or J, like Isaac, Jacob,

³³ Arnold and Beyer, 150-1.

³⁴ Hoffmeier, 40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Joseph and Judah, were very popular in the first half of the second millennium BC. These names declined in the second half.³⁷ Finally, the story of Sarah giving Hagar to Abram to produce an heir is consistent with the Law Code of Hammurabi.³⁸ While incapable of proving the existence of the patriarchs, all of these archaeological discoveries shed light on their lives and make the likelihood of a forgery hundreds of years later very small.

The book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph, and while no direct evidence of “Prime Minister Joseph” currently exists, the details of the Genesis account are very similar to Egyptian life as documented in extra-Biblical stories. Brooklyn Papyrus 35.1466 lists Semitic slaves in Egyptian households in 1800-1750 BC, many of whom were “over the house” (hry-pr) as Joseph was (Genesis 39:4). The same papyrus shows that the price that the Midianite traders paid for Joseph, 20 shekels, was the going rate for a young male slave at the time.³⁹ A later editor or writer would likely have used the rate then-current; 30 shekels in the second half of the second millennium and 50 shekels in the first millennium (cf. Exodus 21:32). Dream interpretation played a major role in the Genesis account of Joseph, and Papyrus Chester Beatty I is an Egyptian “Dream Manual” listing many dreams and their meanings that priests used to interpret them.⁴⁰ Finally, according to ancient Egyptian thought, a good man was considered to have lived his full allotment of years if he died at age 110. Joseph, considered a good man by his adopted

³⁷ Ibid., 42.

³⁸ Ibid., 44.

³⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 47.

homeland, was said to have died at age 110.⁴¹ This again suggests but does not prove the reliability of the Joseph account.

There are other clues to the historical veracity of Genesis. Unlike contemporary stories, the characters in Genesis have a psychological depth which suggests historicity.⁴² The presence of genealogies also supports the factual nature of the Genesis accounts because people, places and nations mentioned can be tied to others.

Conclusion

The book of Genesis is a valid historical document, and as such it strongly supports the historicity of the Bible as a whole. Archeology cannot offer extra-Biblical confirmation of every person, place and event recorded in Genesis, but neither can it offer confirmation of every person, place and event recorded in any other work of antiquity. The evidence that archeology does offer in support of the stories in Genesis is sufficient to convince any reasonable mind to at least take the historical claims of the book seriously.

One of the greatest strengths of the archeology of Genesis is not in offering extra-Biblical confirmation of its stories, but in offering extra-Biblical explanation and clarification of people, places and events in Genesis. Discoveries of life in antiquity casts intriguing light on the lives of the patriarchs and others in Genesis, can make Bible study richer, and can lead believers into a deeper understanding of and relationship with Christ.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Schaffer, 150.

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