

Confirming Biblical History

Part One

The House of David - It's not a House of Cards

Amidst all the political turbulence, it's an exciting year for Israel. The Jewish State is commemorating the 3,000th anniversary of David's conquest of Jerusalem. But not everybody is celebrating. Many scholars still deny that King David ever existed. For such biblical skeptics King David's kingdom is no more historical than the mythical founding of Camelot. Like King Arthur, David was a mythical figure around whom a collection of stories has grown up.

Why do so many scholars persist in this attitude? Because they consider the Bible to be myth until it is confirmed by other sources. In other words, unless the ancient Philistine or Aramean records mention David, such skeptics assume that David did not actually exist. Until recently King Ahab was the earliest biblical character who appears in secular historical records. His treaty with the king of Syria is recorded in Syrian inscriptions. So by our skeptic's rule, no biblical character before Ahab—including King David—can be considered a historical figure.

The summer of 1993 must have come as a great shock to the biblical skeptics. That's when Avraham Biran, an archaeologist at Hebrew Union College, discovered an ancient Aramean inscription at the biblical city of Dan in northern Israel. The inscription dates from the ninth century BC, and it bears the name "David." Now the biblical account goes like this: The kings of Israel and Judah were at war with each other. The king of Judah, fearing defeat, took the gold and silver from the Temple and used it to bribe the king of the Arameans to come fight on his side. The Arameans agreed. They took Judah's gold, attacked Israel—and captured the Israelite city of Dan [I Kings 15:16-22].

Just a myth? The inscription at Dan proves otherwise. It mentions the Aramean victory over Israel—and refers specifically to the king of Israel and the "House of David." That's one in the eye for scholars who claim that David's dynasty was a myth, and that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah didn't exist in the ninth century BC. And there's more. First Kings tells us that the king of Aram was named Ben-Hadad—which means "son of [the storm god] Hadad." Interestingly, the inscription discovered at Dan credits the pagan storm god Hadad with the victory over Israel. Another confirmation of the historical accuracy of I Kings.

The meaning of these exciting archaeological discoveries has not been lost on Christians. In a recent feature article on the historical accuracy of the Bible, *Time* magazine stated that "believers around the world are attuned more than ever to the significance of archaeological finds . . . in establishing the reality of the events underlying their faith." So the next time someone tries to tell you that the Bible is a collection of myths, tell them about the archaeological evidence that King David actually existed. Share this special series with your neighbors. And don't forget to join in the 3,000th-year celebration of David's conquest of Jerusalem. It's more than just a royal tale.

Part Two

Trumpets or Earth Tremors? Accounting for the Destruction of Jericho

One of the most dramatic battles in the Bible is the story of Joshua's trumpets bringing down the walls of Jericho—but until recently many scholars denied that it ever occurred. New evidence, however, disputes the skeptics and confirms the biblical account. Charles Pellegrino discusses the fall of Jericho in his new book entitled *Return to Sodom and Gomorrah*. Pellegrino is an agnostic who set out to examine the archaeological remains of the ancient Near East. During his investigations he was surprised to discover evidence supporting the events recorded in the Old Testament. Pellegrino describes what was for him one of the greatest surprises—the biblical city of Jericho lying underneath layers of dirt and rubble. You see, for decades scholars wrongly assumed that Jericho did not exist in Joshua's time. In fact, the alleged absence of the biblical Jericho was cited in archaeological textbooks as proof that the Bible was not historically accurate.

But a recent reevaluation of the evidence by archaeologist Bryant Woods indicates that Jericho indeed existed during the time of Joshua. It also showed that Jericho's defensive walls fell down in a very unusual way—out from the city and down flat, forming a ramp for an invading army. This is exactly what a student of the Bible would expect to find. According to the Book of Joshua, the walls of Jericho collapsed before the Israelites entered and burned the city. Furthermore, the Bible states that Joshua and his men didn't steal the grain, because God told them to destroy the city without looting it. The archaeological evidence confirms this. An examination of the fossilized food supplies

indicates that the city fell after a very short siege. Curiously, the invaders didn't steal the food supplies. Instead, they scattered the grain and then burned it along with the city, an action that Wood calls "unique in the annals of Palestinian archaeology."

The Bible states that Joshua cursed the city of Jericho—which is another detail confirmed by archaeology. The city sat empty for hundreds of years—as shown by several feet of silt lying above the ancient ruins. The agnostic Pellegrino suggests that the walls of Jericho were felled by an earthquake. As for the centuries that Jericho lay empty, Pellegrino is admittedly stumped: "Cities located near major watercourses are never abandoned for all time," he says, "...but something unusual happened [at Jericho] nonetheless."

Something indeed unusual happened at Jericho—and it takes a leap of faith to believe that an earthquake occurred just when Joshua and the Israelites were planning to attack the city. It takes at least as much faith to accept that naturalistic explanation as it does to accept the biblical account. It's one more reminder that Christians don't need to take a back seat to the biblical skeptics. Use the archaeological evidence from Jericho to answer those who deny that the Old Testament is rooted in historical fact. After all, the story of Joshua's men blowing their trumpets to bring down the walls of Jericho is not just a lot of hot air.

Part Three

Evidence for the Exodus - Moses was not a Pious Invention

"The Exodus and Moses Are Merely Myths"—headlined a recent story in London's Daily Telegraph. The article dismissed the biblical account as merely part of Israel's "falsified heroic legends." But new research demonstrates that the events of the Book of Exodus really did happen.

Liberal scholars have long scoffed at the story of the Exodus. They've insisted that Israelites weren't even living in Egypt at the time when the Bible records their slavery. What does the evidence tell us? Recently, archaeologists working in the Nile Delta unearthed the remains of a house that is completely different from the Egyptian houses around it. This house follows the pattern of houses that the Israelites later built in Canaan. In fact, the floor layout is known as "the Israelite-type house." And this Israelite house was discovered in Tell el-Dab'a—the location of the biblical city of Ra'amses. That's where, according to the biblical text, the Israelites lived in slavery to Pharaoh. That's confirmation of the biblical account of the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt.

Here's another example of the historicity of the biblical record. The Bible says that on their way out of Egypt the Israelites camped at the ancient city of Dibon. Skeptics insist that Dibon didn't even exist at the time of the Exodus. But archaeologists kept looking—and discovered inscriptions in Egypt, at the temple of Amon at Karnak, describing an ancient trade route from Egypt into Palestine. One of the cities listed as lying along this route at the time of the Exodus is none other than Dibon. This shows that the Israelites actually followed a heavily trafficked Egyptian road that did exist at the time of the Exodus. Hershel Shanks, writing in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, concludes that "we [thus] have irrefutable primary historical evidence for the existence of the city of Dibon" in the time of the Exodus.

There's an interesting historical collaboration for one puzzling detail mentioned in the biblical text. There were at least two possible routes that the Israelites could have taken out of Egypt. According to the Book of Exodus, God specifically directed the Israelites not to go along the coastal route by the Mediterranean— even though it was the shorter and most direct route back to Canaan. Scholars have recently unearthed the reason why: The shorter coastal route was studded with Egyptian military garrisons. The Israelites would have walked right into the jaws of the lion.

All this historical confirmation should come as welcome news to Christians—because the Exodus is one of the pivotal events of the Bible. It becomes the paradigm of God's miraculous deliverance of His people, and if it isn't true then the veracity of the rest of the Bible is compromised along with it. Christians need to be aware of the factual foundations of our faith. Find out more in this special "Breakpoint" series. Because, as archaeologist William Dever says, "the only new facts about the Bible are coming out of the ground." And, contrary to the skeptics, the archaeologist's spade is steadily unearthing new evidence for the Bible's historical accuracy.

Part Four

The Great Cover Up - Evidence for Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection

One of the most powerful evidences for the truth of the Gospels is found underneath an ancient church in Jerusalem. Ironically, in attempting to cover up the evidence, the ancient enemies of Christianity preserved it for

later generations. Our story begins in the year 135 AD. The Roman emperor Hadrian had just subjugated Judea after the Second Jewish Revolt. Hadrian was determined to impose Roman religion upon the Judeans. After destroying the Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem, he then turned his attention to the Christians. What better way to squelch this upstart religion than to obliterate its holy places? The site of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection was known and venerated by Christians at the time. So Hadrian concealed the site under a massive concrete platform and built a temple to the pagan god Zeus on top of it.

Nearly two centuries later the tables turned: The emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. He decided to build a magnificent church in Jerusalem to commemorate Christ's crucifixion and resurrection—and he insisted that the church be built upon the actual site. When Constantine's architects arrived in Palestine, Christians pointed them to Hadrian's temple, which marked the very spot.

The builders set to work demolishing the pagan temple. Sure enough, underneath they found the ancient quarry called Golgotha—and nearby, the remains of the tomb of Christ. Today, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City still marks the actual site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. You see, the early Christians knew their faith was rooted in historical events. They built churches throughout the Holy Land for precisely that reason—to mark the actual location.

And the Church of the Holy Sepulchre isn't the only example. The Gospels say that Jesus was tried before the high priest Caiaphas, and then was taken to the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate. The tomb of the Caiaphas family was recently discovered in Jerusalem. Inside were the very bones of the infamous high priest mentioned in the Gospels. As for Pontius Pilate, a first-century inscription discovered at Caesarea confirms that he was indeed procurator of Judea from 26-36 AD. In addition, the second-century Roman historian Tacitus confirms that Christianity was founded by a man named Christus, whom he says was "put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius."

What does all this mean for us? It demonstrates that our faith is based squarely upon the acts of God in human history. The God of the Bible is a personal—yet infinite—God who became a man to walk among us and to redeem us. That's why Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer refers to "the God who is there" who "acts in history, answers prayers, and gives men reality in their lives."

Share the story of "the great cover-up" with those who question the historicity of the Gospels—tell them of the botched attempt to hide the site of Christ's crucifixion. Like the resurrected Christ Himself, the truth could not remain buried for long.

Part Five **Digging Up Dirt - Archaeology's Latest Find**

Someone has been digging up dirt on a royal family—but it has nothing to do with Windsor castle. Archaeologists digging in the rubble of the Near East have made a remarkable discovery about King David of Old Testament times. What they uncovered was a rock fragment inscribed with an ancient text referring to "the House of David," a phrase used for the ruling dynasty founded by King David. The rock appears to be a victory monument erected by a Syrian king nearly 3,000 years after a battle described in the book of First Kings. What makes the finding so significant is that it's the first reference to King David or his royal family ever found outside the pages of the Bible. And it provides new external evidence for the historical reliability of the Bible.

This is by no means the first time archaeology has supported the Bible. Time and time again, critics have flatly stated that some portion of the Bible could not be true. Time and time again, archaeologists chipping away with their hammers have uncovered stunning support for the biblical text.

For example: Critics once said that the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—could not have been written by Moses; that the text mentions rituals and sacrifices not developed until much later. But clay tablets have now been discovered that describe many of the same rituals—tablets that date from even before Moses. There's no longer any reason to doubt that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, just as the Bible claims.

Critics used to dismiss as legend the stories about the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But then cuneiform tablets were discovered containing references to several biblical names: names like Abraham and his brothers, Nahor and Haran. Suddenly those passages in Genesis were transferred from the realm of myth into the realm of real history—where the Bible had put them all along.

Archaeology has also explained unusual customs from Bible times. Both Abraham's wife, Sarah, and Jacob's wife, Rachel, offered servant girls to their husbands to bear children. Modern readers find these passages baffling: How did they come up with something that strikes us as bizarre, even immoral? Archaeology gives the answer. It was a common practice in those times for a barren wife to provide her husband a surrogate. In many ways, the patriarchs were children of their age. Yet only a few centuries later practices like these were completely forgotten. And that makes it impossible for the Genesis account to have been invented later, as critics once claimed.

With a record like this, Christians don't ever need to be intimidated. Some of us are too ready to give in: There are some Christians who say the Bible is not always true in its history, only in its religious message. But there's no need to retreat to this defensive position. From the late nineteenth century, when archaeology first became a science, to just weeks ago, when archaeologists found an ancient text mentioning the "House of David," the Bible has been proved reliable on all levels—religious and historical. The God of faith is also the God of History.

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