

Thy Word Is a Lamp Unto My Feet: The Bible for Today

When the Rocks Cry Out

Lesson #5 for May 5, 2007

Scripture: Isaiah 20:1; Nahum 3:2-7; Luke 19:40; John 20:24-31; Hebrews 11:24-27.

1. This lesson is about archaeology and what it tells us about the truthfulness or the historical accuracy of the Bible. In the mid to late 1800s, people, particularly in Germany, were raising all sorts of questions about the Bible. That was, no doubt, a part of the pendulum swinging back and forth in Europe: in the late 1700s, the French tried to do away with religion and the church completely; in the early 1800s, there was an enormous revival of religion, out of which grew the Seventh-day Adventist church; in the late 1800s, a swing back to skepticism and atheism led to the methods of higher criticism. Many people, even those calling themselves biblical scholars, raised all sorts of questions and proposed new theories to explain biblical stories and their origins. Almost universally those new theories resulted in a discrediting of the Bible. But in the subsequent decades, archaeologists began to develop a new scientific methodology in which they carefully studied sites and “findings” from the ancient Middle East. To the amazement of many, archaeology quite consistently demonstrated that the biblical records were accurate when understood correctly!
2. But can archaeology prove the Bible? Can it discredit the Bible? Even Jesus made a very interesting statement recorded in Luke 19:40, “I tell you that if they keep quiet, the stones themselves will start shouting.” (GNB) Was that a subtle prophecy about the future role of archaeology? What did Jesus mean by that statement?
3. There are many statements in the Bible made about the eventual condition of major kingdoms from Old Testament times. Any one of those statements could be used to disprove the prophecies of the Bible. Why hasn’t anyone gone back to live in Babylon or Nineveh? Why hasn’t the capital of Edom been re-populated?
4. Before archaeology could become a modern science, several major hurdles had to be overcome. First of all, we needed to learn how to read the ancient languages. The Egyptians wrote in hieroglyphics. The Mesopotamians used cuneiform. Up until the 19th century, no one could read those ancient scripts. The skills for doing so had been completely lost. But then the Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799. It was written in three languages: ancient hieroglyphics on the top, demotic Egyptian in the middle, and Greek on the bottom. That was the key—with a lot of work—for the discovery of how to interpret the ancient hieroglyphic writings.
5. About the same time, work was being done on a huge carved inscription with pictures found at Behistun in Iran and written in three scripts: Persian, Babylonian, and Elamite. Henry C. Rawlinson figured out how to interpret those cuneiform symbols and thus, unlocked the Mesopotamian languages.

6. After those discoveries had led to a fairly clear understanding of ancient languages and archaeology had become a modern science, in 1942 Dr. W. F. Albright, the father of modern archaeology, said, "There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition."--*Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, Md.: the Johns Hopkins University press, 1942), p. 176.
7. One year earlier, Miller Burrows from Yale said, "On the whole, however, archaeological work has unquestionably strengthened confidence in the reliability of the scriptural record. More than one archaeologist has found his respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine."--*What Mean These Stones?* (New Haven, Conn.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1941), page 1.
8. K. A. Kitchen: "In terms of general reliability... the Old Testament comes out remarkably well, so long as its writings and writers are treated fairly and evenhandedly."--*On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmann's Publishing Co., 2003), p. 500.
9. But there are still questions! And some of those questions have only become more difficult because of archaeological exploration. Let us review briefly some of the examples of successes and possible defeats in archaeology. For many years critics have read the accounts of the ancient father of history, Herodotus from Greece, and pointed out that the last king of Babylon was Nabonidus and not Belshazzar as the prophet Daniel had stated. Records from many different sources show the sequence of kings down through Babylon and transferring to Medo-Persia with no mention of the name of Belshazzar. But then in the 20th century, a small clay cylinder was discovered on which Nabonidus himself explained that while working in the kingdom of Arabia and establishing a temple to the moon god *Sin* in Teima in that country, he left the city of Babylon under the jurisdiction of his son Belshazzar. If Daniel had not been there as an eyewitness, how would he have known that? In the days of the Maccabees, at the time when most people believe the book of Daniel was written, all history of Belshazzar seemed to have been lost. Once again, the biblical record and its historicity has been confirmed.
10. Early in the 20th century, a British archaeologist conducted an exploration of the city of Jericho. After digging for some time, he came to a large layer of burned ash and declared victoriously that he had found the Jericho which was burned by God and the children of Israel soon after they crossed the Jordan River. But some 20 or 30 years later, Kathleen Kenyon, the daughter of the curator of the British Museum, went back and did some additional archaeological exploration and concluded that based on the pottery that was found in the layers of Jericho, the ashes which the previous archaeologist had found where not from the time of Joshua. She concluded that Jericho was not even inhabited at the time of Joshua! Of course, she believed that Joshua did not enter Canaan until late in the 13th century B.C. while conservative Christian scholars believe that it was late in the 15th century B.C. Had archaeology disapproved the Bible? The problem has not yet

been resolved. However, in very recent years, another archaeologist has reviewed the previous archaeology and done some additional exploration in Jericho himself. It is a very difficult place to work in our day because of the political climate. This latest archaeologist, however, has determined that Kathleen Kenyon apparently did not date the pottery she looked at correctly, and that, in fact, the layers of ash may have been from the days of Joshua! Biblical scholars have not yet, in general, accepted that conclusion. Stand by! This question is still up in the air.

11. Before entering the land of Canaan from the east, the children of Israel were instructed to attack and conquer the land of Sihon and the land of Og. You can read about the conquest of their territories in Numbers 21:21-35. For a number of years, an Adventist-led team has been digging at the site of what was believed to be ancient Heshbon, Sihon's capital. Although it has been excavated quite extensively, no evidence of its destruction by the Israelites has yet surfaced. Now the Adventist team has moved to another site not far away and is excavating further. Will this new site prove to be the Heshbon of the days of Moses and Joshua?
12. Read 2 Kings 3:4-27. That text is a record of the relationship between King Mesha of Moab and the nation of Israel. Interestingly enough, a large black basalt stone monument has been found that was made for King Mesha. The Moabite stone describes how Mesha rebelled and the armies of Israel eventually left (after Mesha sacrificed his son to the god, Chemosh) so that he no longer had to pay tribute to Israel. Prior to the discovery of the Moabite stone, scholars had questioned the truthfulness of the biblical account. (See *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*)
13. Individuals are also mentioned in scripture in many places. Cyrus, the first king of Medo-Persia, was particularly interesting in terms of what the Bible says about him. Isaiah had prophesied about Cyrus about 150 years before he was even born! (Isaiah 44:28-45:13.)
14. Read 2 Kings 19:36,37. King Sennacherib retreated to his home in great defeat after 180,000 of his Assyrian soldiers were killed outside Jerusalem by the angel of God. Not long thereafter, two of his sons murdered him and a third son, Esarhaddon, succeeded him as king. Those events have now been confirmed by tablets found in Assyria.
15. There are many clay tablets which were found at Ebla in the 1970s which are "now considered more significant for elucidating ancient history and the early background of the Bible than any other archaeological discovery ever unearthed."—*Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*, pages 1653, 1654.
16. Many of the ancient customs in the days of Abraham have been confirmed by the discovery of the Law Code of Hammurabi in 1901-1902 at Susa and Nuzi.
17. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was one of the great cities of the ancient world. For many years the Assyrians were probably the dominant power in the Mediterranean world. But during the days when Nineveh ruled, the prophet Nahum stated in Nahum 3:2-7 that

Ninevah would be completely destroyed. (Compare Zephaniah 2:13) Later, Isaiah 13:19-22 states that Babylon was never to be inhabited again! How did the prophet Isaiah know that? Babylon was once a great city, indeed the ruling city of the world and had the following major features: 1) A wall around the main city more than 11 miles long and 85 feet thick; 2) many gates, including the Ishtar gate with its enamel bricks showing 575 dragons and bulls and 120 lions; and 3) the gorgeously decorated palace of Nebuchadnezzar with its banquet hall and throne room, 57 feet wide and 168 feet long. Yet, God's prophecy about this city has proved 100% accurate. Why haven't some of the biblical critics tried to disprove the Bible by reestablishing Nineveh or Babylon?

18. Read Genesis 15:20; Exodus 3:8; Joshua 1:4; 1 Kings 10:29; 2 Chronicles 1:17. There are many references in the Bible to the Hittites. There was a large Hittite kingdom located in central Turkey and members of the Hittite group scattered throughout the Middle East. Abraham purchased a burial site for Sarah from Ephron the Hittite. (Genesis 23:3-20) Bathsheba's first husband was Uriah the Hittite. The ancient Hittite empire in Turkey "disappeared" around the year 1170 B.C. However, members of the Hittite group remained for many years thereafter. But for thousands of years, the Hittites "disappeared from history." People questioned the truthfulness of the Bible because of those references to Hittites. But then the Hittite kingdom was found and the scattered peoples recognized.
19. There are some archaeological challenges which have not yet been dealt with. Why is it that there is apparently no archaeological evidence for the presence of the children of Israel in the land of Egypt or in the Sinai Peninsula during those 40 years of wandering? If millions of people died in the desert, where are their bones? Did they leave absolutely no trace? Are we perhaps looking in the wrong place? Is there truly no trace of the presence of the Israelites in Egypt, as most scholars believe? Some very interesting archaeological material has been discovered recently suggesting that at one time, a Semite, possibly a Hebrew, was in a high-level position in Egypt. Could that be a trace from the days of Joseph, or even Moses? We will await further archaeological evidence.
20. When it comes to archaeology and our belief in scriptures, what is the relationship between evidence and faith? Is belief in something—sometimes called faith—evidence that that thing exists? (Hebrews 11:1, *KJV*) What did Jesus mean speaking to Thomas in the upper room when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:29, *NRSV*). Was Jesus chiding Thomas for his lack of faith? Was Jesus suggesting that Thomas should have faith based on no evidence? Or better evidence? What evidence did Thomas have for believing at that point? **If you had all of the disciples except Judas around you to tell you something is true and provide the evidence that they had experienced themselves but you still refused to believe because you had not touched it yourself, would that be evidence of faith or unreasonable doubt?**
21. What was Peter suggesting when he said in 1 Peter 3:15 that we should be ready at all

times to give an answer? Does Archaeology give us more and better answers?

22. The Bible makes few attempts to try to prove its truthfulness. Why do you think that is? Is it necessary for us to do that in our day?
23. There is a great deal of material on archaeology and the Bible. A good summary is found in the article, "Archaeology and the Recovery of Ancient History," pages 99-132. Notice their conclusion in *SDA Bible Comm.*, vol. 1, p. 100:

In the flood of light thrown by archaeology upon the ancient civilizations the Old Testament stands forth not only as historically reliable but also as unique in scope, power, and lofty ideals in comparison with the best products of the ancient world.

24. Should we be biblical minimalists or biblical "maximalists"? Do we choose to believe what the Bible says unless it can be disproved? Or do we choose not to believe what the Bible says unless it can be proven? While archaeology can never prove the Bible, it has provided a great deal of evidence in support of the biblical record.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

EVIDENCE	DATES	CULTURE	SIGNIFICANCE
Ebla	2350–1600 B.C.	Eblaic Sumerian	Early advanced civilization & written language—large library
City of Ur (Dynasty III)	2000 B.C.	Sumerian	Early advanced civilization
Code of Hammurabi	1700 B.C. (Rowton)	Akkadian	Parallels Mosaic Code
Egyptian Execration Texts of Dynasty XII	1900 B.C.	Egyptian Hieroglyphic	Egyptian claims to sovereignty over Canaanite cities
Mari Tablets	1700 B.C.	Hurrian	Documentation of Nakhur, Habiru; patriarchal customs
Inscriptions from turquoise mines of Serabit el-Khadim	1500 B.C.	Proto-Phoenician	Early Pictographic Alphabet

Ras Shamra Tablets	1400 B.C.	Ugaritic	Epic poetry styles; Early sacrificial terms
Nuzi Tablets	1400 B.C.	Hurrian	Confirm historicity of Patriarchal customs in Genesis
Hittite Legal Code	1300 B.C.	Hittite	Patriarchal Suzerainty treaty; Patriarchal customs
Tel-el-Amarna Tablets	1400 B.C.	Akkadian Cuneiform	References to Hebrew Conquest of Canaan
Merneptah Stela	1220 B.C.	Egyptian	Mention of the name "Israel"
Gezer Calendar	925 B.C.	Hebrew	Writing prevalent
Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III	840 B.C.	Akkadian	Confirmation of Israel's King Jehu
Moabite Stone	840 B.C.	Moabite	Historicity of 2 KINGS 3 and Omri
Sargon's Inscription	720 B.C.	Akkadian	Sargon's victory over Samaria
Siloam Inscription Hezekiah's Tunnel	702 B.C.	Hebrew	Hezekiah's water diversion tunnel
Taylor Prism of Sennacherib	685 B.C.	Akkadian	Sennacherib's advance against Judah in 701 B.C.
Neo-Babylonian Chronicle	600 B.C.	Akkadian	Record of Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Palestine
Lachish Ostraca	ca. 588 B.C.	Akkadian	Chaldean invasion of Judah
Nabonidus Chronicle	550 B.C.	Neo-Babylonian Akkadian	Records Belshazzar as secondary ruler of Babylon
Behistun Rock	500 B.C.	Old Persian, Elamite, Akkadian	Non-biblical reference to Persian conquest of Babylon under Darius
Cyrus Cylinder	500 B.C.	Old Persian	Cyrus's victory and decree permitting freedom of worship
Elephantine papyri	420 B.C.	Aramaic	Imperial Aramaic of the time of Daniel & Ezra

Adapted from A SURVEY OF OLD TESTAMENT INTRODUCTION