The Role of Archaeology

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connection to the father in this quotation: “Jesus answered, ‘Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going’” (John 8:14). Jesus Christ can validate his own word because he is God (John 4:26; Phil 2:6–8). As Calvin has put it, Scripture “carries within itself its own credentials.”

The moving cause of faith in the self-authentication of the Bible is the role of the Holy Spirit. That is to say that Scripture is believed, not because of the Holy Spirit but through the witness of the Holy Spirit. Packer further explains:

The Scriptures authenticate themselves to Christian believers through the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to recognize, bow before, divine realities. It is he who enlightens us to receive the man Jesus as God’s incarnate Son, and our Saviour; similarly, it is he who enlightens us to receive sixty-six pieces of human writing as God’s inscripturated Word, given to make us “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). In both cases, this enlightening is not a private revelation of something that has not been made public, but the opening of minds sinfully closed so that they receive evidence to which they were previously impervious.

THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

But what exactly then is the role of archaeology? Some people believe that archaeology can be used to confirm, authenticate, substantiate or even prove the Bible true. This view goes back to the nineteenth century when the liberal critics began to use archaeology to disprove the Bible. For example in 1872 George E. Smith translated the Mesopotamian flood story and found parallels with the biblical record. The critics quickly came to the conclusion that the Genesis account was borrowed from the Mesopotamian account and was not inspired.

When archaeologists found no trace of the Hittite civilization, the biblical critics made the claim that the Hittite people were imaginary. In 1876 Sayce delivered a lecture to the Society of Biblical Archaeology in London making a startling claim that the Hittites were a vast empire but the capital was yet to be discovered. In 1906 when the Hittite civilization was discovered by Hugo Winckler, along with the royal archive of 10,000 tablets during his excavations at Boğazköy (Ḫattuša), this brought a new zeal to archaeology and its use for defending the Bible. Believers

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25 Bryce, Life and Society in the Hittite World, 2.
began to think that archaeology had validated their faith.

But as Hoerth states:

Even if every historical statement in the Bible could be proven true – confirmed – this would still not prove the theological message of the Bible…It can be proved that historical conditions were such that Solomon could have been as powerful a king as the Bible says he was; but this does not prove that God gave Solomon wisdom. It can be fairly well substantiated that there was a census when Jesus was born; but this confirmation hardly proves his divinity. No archaeological evidence will prove the atonement.26

It is interesting that eminent archaeologist William F. Albright was lead more towards a respect for the historicity of the Bible but was increasingly more liberal in his theology.27 One must be careful not to assume too much from archaeology.

No archaeological evidence can verify the atonement or the virgin birth. As Vaux points out: “This spiritual truth can neither be proven nor contradicted, nor can it be confirmed or invalidated by the material discoveries of archaeology.”28 Albright also cautions that

Though archaeology can thus clarify the history and geography of ancient Palestine, it cannot explain the basic miracle of Israel’s faith, which remains a unique factor in world history. But archaeology can help enormously in making the miracle rationally plausible to an intelligent person whose vision is not shortened by a materialistic world view.29

Hoerth summarizes Yamauchi and points out that:

no one questioned the historicity of either Pontius Pilate or Herod the Great, yet neither were found in inscriptions until the early 1960’s. It is a mistake to insist that traditions – including the Old Testament stories – must interlock with other evidences before they can be believed.30

But this is not a division between history and faith because it is impossible to separate faith from history. The problem lies not with the evidence but with our faith. Even if we were to prove every Bible story as historically accurate by referencing archaeological evidence, this still would not solve the dilemma of sinful human nature. This in essence is what Jesus taught in the account of the rich man and Lazarus.

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five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead’ (Luke 16:27–31).

The question of sufficient evidence is certainly not at issue here since the resurrection alone offers abundant evidence for belief in the gospel. Jesus states there is even enough evidence in Moses and the Prophets to be convinced of repentance but still people refuse to believe. Jesus did rise from the dead and there were hundreds of witnesses to the resurrection but people continue to doubt. The problem is not in the lack of evidence but because of the human condition of spiritual blindness and the unbelief of the human heart (Luke 16:27–31; 1 Cor 2:14). Humanity needs a changed heart and nature not more evidence. Archaeology does not change hearts only the landscape. As Charlesworth put it: “Archaeology cannot form faith, but it can help inform faith.”

God may use archaeology to change our hearts but this is not its main purpose.

Raymond uses a helpful illustration of the radio station which transmits the signal properly, but the radio at the other end cannot pick up the signal because there is something wrong with the radio not the transmission.

The Bible does not need proving true but archaeology can help shed light on the text. Therefore, the value of archaeology is not apologetic but hermeneutic. It increases our understanding of the Bible. Hoerth describes the various uses for archaeology:

The most important contributions of archaeology to biblical studies are the various ways it illuminates the cultural and historical setting of the Bible; adds to our knowledge of the people, places, things and events in the Bible; and aids in translation and exegesis of biblical passages.

The new information we acquire to advance our knowledge of the biblical text only comes from the discipline of archaeology. The role of archaeology in our understanding of the text is immeasurable. The ground and text work together to further our understanding of the Bible.

### Facts from Archaeology

#### NT Manuscripts

The total copies of NT documents in various languages exceed 24,000. This includes 5,752 manuscripts in Greek and thousands of manuscripts in Syriac, Latin, Georgian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Aramaic. There are more than 10,000 Latin MSS alone. As Wallace points out

No one really knows the total number of all these ancient versions, but the best estimates are close to 5,000–plus the 10,000 in Latin. It would be safe to say that we have altogether about 20,000 handwritten manuscripts of the NT in various languages, including Greek. [While some of them are fragments] the average Greek NT MS is over 450 pages long. Altogether, there are more than 2.6 million pages of texts, leaving hundreds of witnesses for every book of the NT.

In addition the Church fathers used more than one million quotations from the NT.

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32 Raymond, New Systematic Theology, 81.

33 Hoerth, Archaeology and the Old Testament, 17.


Metzger and Ehrman point out that:

[If] all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, [the patristic quotations] would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.\(^{36}\)

**SUFFICIENCY**

This point highlights the Reformer’s doctrine of Scripture alone (Latin *sola Scriptura*). The living voice of the prophets and apostles ceased (Heb 1:1) with the completion of the written NT. The early Christians did not have a written NT, but they were blessed with the inspired apostles living among them and speaking the word of God that they referred to as “the tradition” (2 Thess 3:6). This is different to the ongoing tradition in the church following the death of the apostles because once the church had Scripture the apostles’ tradition was inscripturated and this tradition was sufficient for all things pertaining to salvation. The *Baptist Confession of Faith* frames the sufficiency of Scripture like this:

> The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men.\(^{37}\)

The logically deduced arguments of Scripture also do not add anything additional to Scripture, but as Frame points out, “logic sets forth the *meaning* of Scripture.”\(^{38}\)

**Quotes from Antiquity**

**Martin Luther on Translations**

Luther testified in 1566:

> While the Romish church stood, the Bible was never given to the people in such a shape that they could clearly, understandingly, surely, and easily read it, as they now can in the German translation, which, thank God, we have prepared here at Wittenberg.\(^{39}\)

**Preservation**

John Owen, the great Puritan, said that “the malice of Satan hath raged no less against the book than against the truth contained in it.”\(^{40}\) History records that the plots of kings, emperors, and church leaders have tried at times to burn, corrupt, and destroy the Bible. These attempts were to no avail.

**Pagan Attack**

Emperor Diocletian boasted that the name Christian would be blotted out with the Christian’s book. However, at his death his son Constantine took the throne in AD 325. Constantine said the Bible is the infallible judge of truth and ordered the Bible to be copied at the government’s expense. The Emperors are gone, but the Bible has been preserved.

**Moments in History**

**Diocletian’s Attack**

After an unfavourable reading of the liver from an animal sacrifice, a customary Roman practice, Diocletian, the Roman Emperor, sought the oracle of Apollo at Miletus for the cause. The gods through the oracle blamed it on the Christians, who were present at the sacrifice and apparently crossed themselves. Henry Chadwick describes what happened next on Feb 24 AD

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