ARCHEOLOGY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

God has preserved two records of his dealings with mankind throughout history. The one, breathed through the pens of men born along by the Holy Spirit, is the inspired Scriptures. The other, etched in strange tongues and found midst the rubble and ruined remains of ancient civilizations, recounts to us the wars and treaties, religions and laws, political alliances and languages of peoples of the past. The science of discovering, deciphering and critically evaluating this second record to understand better the life and times of ancient men is called archeology.

The study of the past is no new pursuit. We find records of Babylonian and Assyrian kings who were avid collectors of what were to them ancient libraries. Nebuchadnezzar even designed a palace museum to house “statues, inscribed stones, and other relics from the past.” Though Biblical archeology is a comparatively new field of study, it has made tremendous contributions to our understanding of Scripture. This paper examines the three primary areas which Biblical archeology illuminates: cultural background, linguistics, and historical setting.

Cultural Background

In 1925-31, archeologists excavating in northeast Iraq uncovered the ancient city of Nuzu that was once inhabited by the Hurrians (the Horites of

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In this city, 4000 clay tablets came to light which detailed the everyday transactions of ordinary Nuzians in the 15-14th century B.C. Though 300-500 years later than the patriarchs, the customs of Nuzi parallel in many respects the practices of the patriarchs. Among the numerous Biblical narratives illuminated by Nuzi customs, the Hagar-Abraham incident stands out.

The modern believer must find it strange indeed to have Abraham, the father of the faith, taking his wife’s handmaiden, Hagar, in order to father God’s promised heir. However, the Nuzi tablets reveal that in Hurrian culture, which was Abraham’s background, the primary purpose of marriage was to beget an heir. The Nuzi marriage contracts specified that if a wife could not bear children she was to furnish a slave-wife with whom her husband would father an heir. If an heir was born to the original wife, the slave’s son was not to be dispossessed or expelled. This Nuzi cultural information sheds light both on Abraham’s willingness to take Hagar and on his reticence to expel Ishmael from his home (Genesis 21:1-12). Other OT patriarchal accounts that find parallels in the Nuzi tablets include the significance and binding nature of a father’s deathbed will, as in Isaac’s

4 In Akkadian, the nominative ending is “u.” The city’s name should then be “Nuzu,” but it is only found with the genitive case ending, i.e., “Nuzi.” Thus, all future references will use the genitive case ending. The city of Nuzi is located east of the Tigris River, just south of the location of Nineveh, close to the 36th parallel (latitude).

5 Part of the Nuzi marriage contract reads “Keli[m-ninu] has been given in marriage to Shen[nima]. If Keli bears (children), Shen shall not take another wife; but if Keli does not bear, Keli shall acquire a woman of the land of Lullu as a wife for Shen, and Keli may not send the offspring away. Any son that may be born to Shen from the womb of Keli to (these) shall be given ... the lands (and) buildings of every sort.” James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, vol. 1. Translated by Theophile J. Meek (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 170. For subsequent liberal arguments for a return to a late date for the patriarchs based on late marriage customs found in Egypt, see John Van Seters, “The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968): 401-408.
blessing of Jacob,\textsuperscript{6} the designation of a household slave to be one’s heir, as in Abraham’s choice of Eliezer as heir before the birth of Ishmael,\textsuperscript{7} the sale of a birthright, as in Esau’s sale to Jacob,\textsuperscript{8} and a father’s charge to a son-in-law regarding the treatment of his daughter, as in Laban’s charging of Jacob at Galeed.\textsuperscript{9}

These parallels provide cultural moorings for actions that may seem obscure to the modern reader and allow the reader to appreciate the patriarchs as historical individuals who were influenced, sometimes wrongly, by their cultural contexts.\textsuperscript{10} Further, the fact that these customs existed challenges claims of critical scholarship that Genesis’ account of the patriarchs was largely fictional and written at a much later time in history.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Linguistics}

Archeology has also supplemented our understanding of the Old Testament through the discovery of related or cognate languages. In 1928-29, a Syrian farm worker accidentally discovered the ancient Canaanite city of Nuzi.\textsuperscript{12}

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\textsuperscript{6} The Nuzi tablets document the successful legal case of a man who establishes his right to a woman he married by citing his father’s deathbed will giving him permission to marry her. Cyrus H. Gordon, “Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets” \textit{The Biblical Archeologist} 3, no. 1 (1940): 8.

\textsuperscript{7} Keith A. Schoville, \textit{Biblical Archaeology in Focus}, 194; Alfred E. Hoerth, \textit{Archaeology and the Old Testament} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 102-103.

\textsuperscript{8} Hoerth, \textit{Archeology and the Old Testament}, 109; Schoville, 104.

\textsuperscript{9} J. A. Thompson, \textit{The Bible and Archaeology}, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 36.

\textsuperscript{10} Hoerth, 17. See also Hoerth, 102-121, for a helpful discussion of cultural contexts’ significance for the interpretation of the biblical account of the patriarchs.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Ugarit\textsuperscript{12}. In this city, Claude F. A. Schaeffer unearthed 1400 alphabetic cuneiform tablets written in the Ugaritic language.\textsuperscript{13} This language proved to be so a close relative of Hebrew that a comparative analysis of the two languages yielded significant insight into Hebrew.\textsuperscript{14} One example of this touches upon our understanding of the occupation of the prophet Amos.

Amos 1:1 states that Amos was a ‘herdsman’ from Tekoa. The Hebrew word used here for ‘herdsman’ is \textit{noqed}; however, the normal Hebrew term for shepherd is \textit{ro’eh}. An examination of Ugaritic texts shows that a ‘\textit{nqd}’ was a shepherd with a unique social status: one who was part of the royal palace. The \textit{noqedim} were not simple working shepherds, but managers of large sheep herds. Understanding this Hebrew word in the light of its Ugaritic parallel changes our conception of Amos from that of a roughhewn man of the fields to a “business man” with a responsible position in the palace who managed large sheep herds. This linguistic insight reveals the sterling of Amos’ character. Though he was not a prophet by profession (Amos 7:14),

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\textsuperscript{12} Ugarit is located north of Israel on the Mediterranean coast just opposite the eastern tip of Cyprus.\\
\textsuperscript{14} Craigie, \textit{Ugarit and the Old Testament}, 68-71. However, some of the oft-cited parallels, especially between the Psalms and Canaanite literature, are less than convincing. Craigie cogently responds to the classic liberal interpretation of similarities between the Psalms and Canaanite poetry as evidence of borrowing from or reworking of original Canaanite material. Citing Psalm 29 as an example, he says that it rings out with praise to Yahweh as the Lord of nature “in a world dominated by the belief that nature was the domain of Baal.”
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when God called, he was willing to leave all that he had to be a herald proclaiming “Thus said Yahweh...”\textsuperscript{15}

Another example is the clarification of Proverbs 26:23 which reads, “Burning lips and a wicked heart [are like] a potsherd covered with silver dross” in the King James Version. The synonymous parallelism is somewhat obscured by reading the first two words of the Hebrew as \textit{ksp sygym}. However, if the two words are read together as \textit{kspsygym}, the root \textit{spsg} is seen to be an Ugaritic word which means quartz or glaze. This gives the admirable rendering, “As glaze overlaid upon a potsherd [so are] burning lips and a wicked heart [my translation].”\textsuperscript{16}

A final example may be the word traditionally translated “scarlet” in Proverbs 31:21. G. R. Driver suggested on the basis of Ugaritic evidence that it should be translated “double-layered,” which would fit the contextual reference to warm winter clothing well.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Historical Setting}

Finally, archeology often provides a historical backdrop for events only casually mentioned in the Bible. One fascinating example of this is the difference between the Biblical account of Omri, king of Israel, and the

\textsuperscript{15}Craige, 71-73.


\textsuperscript{17}The Hebrew word “scarlet” here may be a special form of the word “two” as in the case of its occurrence in Ugaritic literature. In this context “two” would then refer to double-layered clothing, which would affirm the Proverbs 31 woman’s care for her family in ensuring that they are adequately protected against the winter cold. G. R. Driver, “On a Passage in the Baal Epic (IV AB iii 24) and Proverbs xxxi 21,” \textit{BASOR} 105 (1947): 11. See also Walter G. Williams, \textit{Archaeology in Biblical Research} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 175. For a contrary view, see Bruce C. Waltke, \textit{The Book of Proverbs}, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 2:512.
contemporary world's view of him. 1 Kings 16:23-28, six short verses characterize the life of King Omri by two things: 1) he bought the hill Shemer and built his capital Samaria on it, and 2) “Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the LORD, and did worse than all that were before him.” In contrast to this description of Omri is the implied acclaim found in extra-Biblical sources.

In 1868, an English missionary discovered the Moabite Stone which tells of the victories of Mesha, king of Moab. Inscribed in this account is the statement that Omri oppressed Moab 40 years. This statement cleared up the missing link between the end of Solomon’s reign when Moab revolted and 2 Kings 3:4 which states that Mesha, king of Moab, rendered tribute to Israel. Unnoted by Scripture, Omri had reestablished control in Moab during his reign. However, during the reign of Omri’s son, Ahab, Moab rebelled and withheld its tribute. It completely succeeded in regaining its independence after Ahab’s death. Further recognition of Omri is given in Assyrian records from the 9th to 7th centuries which consistently call Northern Israel the “land of Omri.” Though Omri’s political leadership and military prowess were actually quite short-lived, he apparently earned a big name for himself in the world’s eyes. The contrast between what God views as significant and what the world considers important is starkly apparent in the

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18 2 Kings 3:5 indicates that when Ahab died, Moab rebelled. However, in the Moabite Stone, King Mesha claims to have gained freedom from Israel during Ahab’s reign. This discrepancy is probably the result of two differing perspectives on these events. Moab most likely dated its independence from the time of its refusal to pay tribute, whereas Israel dated Moab’s independence from the time it [Israel] lost the battle recorded in 2 Kings 3. J. A. Thompson, The Bible and Archaeology, 128-131. Note that D. Winton Thomas, ed., in Documents from Old Testament Times (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1958; reprint, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 195-199, evidences the inscrutable liberal tendency to credit a greater degree of veracity to pagan documents than to inspired scripture.

19 Thomas, 52-59. Records from Shalmaneser III (853-841 B.C.) through Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) all speak of Israel as the “land of Omri” or the “house of Omri.”
differences between Scripture’s account of Omri and that of the contemporary world.\textsuperscript{20}

In conclusion, several observations concerning archeology’s relation to the Bible are in order. First, archeology should never be looked to in order to prove the Bible. As the inspired, inerrant word of God, the Bible needs no proof.\textsuperscript{21} Second, archeology’s primary value lies in the area of hermeneutics. Properly understood archeology should be an aid to interpretation. The Bible is unique in that the principles which it conveys transcend both time and culture, yet the historical application of those principles was undeniably rooted in the soil of culture. As archeology brings to light the historical background, linguistic information, and cultural practices of the times in which scripture was written, the informed expositor should be enabled to apply more accurately the principles found in God’s word to his world.


\textsuperscript{21} Even if the Scriptures were not inerrant, archeology is a poor science to use to prove anything. The high degree of subjectivity in analyzing the raw data makes hard-and-fast conclusions improbable. For example, the relatively wide variations in proposed dates for the Third Intermediate Period of Egyptian chronology make it difficult to identify the Pharaoh of the Exodus with certainty. For a helpful discussion of what archeology can prove, see Randall Price, \textit{The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals About the Bible} (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 321-46.
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