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# THE LIMITATIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IMPOSED BY INTERPRETATION AND LACK OF DATA

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The science of archaeology came to the aid of the Bible student at a time when destructive higher criticism, spawned by seventeenth century English deism and eighteenth century German rationalism, was making severe inroads on the credibility of the historical records in the Bible. At first the critical scholars discounted the claims of archaeology. When Hermann Hilprecht discovered bricks in the ruins of a Babylonian temple bearing the stamp of a king whom the scholars believed to be mythical, they accused Hilprecht of fabricating the temple ruins himself as a hoax. But, little by little, surely and inexorably, the retreat began. Today no reputable archaeologist, liberal or conservative, would presume to undertake the excavation of a Biblical site without studying very carefully all that the Bible has to say about it. To do so may save hours or days of futile effort.

Perhaps because archaeology made the Bible stories come alive by bringing to the daylight the very objects looked upon or used by people of Bible times, it earned its earliest reputation as a means to "prove the Bible true." No doubt this is the role in which archaeology holds its chief interest to the layman today. It is quite limited in this respect, however. Its usefulness is confined almost entirely to the corroboration of Biblical history and cognate areas, such as anthropology and sociology. In only the rarest of cases can it provide proofs pertaining to doctrine, religion, or ethics--areas which do not lend themselves so easily to objective proof.

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This paper was read before the Midwestern section of the Evangelical Theological Society at Winona Lake, Indiana, April 17, 1970.

An even more important function of archaeology, however, has been its ability to provide an accurate setting or backdrop for the Bible story. As techniques become more refined, the reconstruction of the past has been accomplished in much greater detail, and this has proved an invaluable aid to the proper understanding of the Bible. Archaeology is, therefore, a hermeneutic as well as an apologetic.

Science has made tremendous strides in this age. Nevertheless, the sincere scientist is quite humble in his attitude toward his chosen field. He knows only too well the limitations of science and is constantly re-examining his own assumptions. The layman, on the other hand, has been conditioned to the marvels of science. Almost unquestioningly he accepts the premise that if science says it is true, that settles it. Who dares to challenge it?

The scientific methods employed by archaeology place it in this enviable position of seeming infallibility. If then some new insight into the interpretation of data or the acquisition of new data makes it necessary to revise the thesis formerly held, some persons may become badly shaken. They wonder just what they can believe. Didn't science say it was so? How then can it be altered so readily? Less mature individuals may become deeply disturbed by such instances. They feel somehow that, by changing his views, the archaeologist has let them down.

It should be borne in mind, however, that with archaeology, as with any other science, the existing body of knowledge obtained through the scientific method, lies at varying levels of certainty. Some facts are so well-attested that their certainty is virtually absolute. There is, for example, extremely little likelihood that any evidence will turn up to disprove the existence of a nation called the Hittites or of such persons as Sargon II (formerly known only in the Bible, and then only in one place, Isaiah 20:1), or of a Babylonian king named Belshazzar; yet each of these now-accepted facts was at one time regarded as mythical.

It was once argued that the Book of Daniel must necessarily be of late date because it contains Greek names for certain musical instruments, and Greek was surely unknown to the Hebrews of the traditional date of Daniel. The finding of Greek shields and weapons at the site of the battle of Carchemish, however, revealed the fact that Pharaoh Necho had Greek mercenary soldiers marching in his army when he came through Israel in Josiah's day.<sup>1</sup> Recent evidence of the great antiquity of the Greek language makes it highly unlikely that the Hebrews knew nothing of the Greeks. This will be discussed later.

At a somewhat lower level of certainty are the conclusions which, although apparently well-established, could conceivably be altered if enough

evidence to the contrary should present itself. An example has to do with the location of Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham's birthplace. In earlier days, both northern and southern sites were suggested for Ur. Many favored a site somewhere in Northern Mesopotamia. The Chebar River or place of Ezekiel's exile<sup>2</sup> was believed to be the Khabur or Habor River in upper Mesopotamia near Haran. Urfa (later called Edessa) was one suggested site for Ur. Woolley's discovery of the amazing and very ancient civilization in lower Mesopotamia led to a greater confidence in the southern Ur as the probable site of Abraham's city, and the Chebar River, in turn, was believed to be a canal in Babylonia. But not all abandoned the northern site. Cyrus Gordon<sup>3</sup> argues for a place called Ura which seems to have been northeast of Haran. In the royal palace at Ugarit was found a tablet sent to the King of Ugarit by his superior, Hattusil III of Hattusa, the Hittite capital in Asia Minor. The tablet stipulates that traveling merchants from Ura could not purchase real estate, no doubt lest they gain too much control in the land. The Genesis narrative twice refers to the patriarchs as traders<sup>4</sup> and Abraham is said to have had much silver and gold as well as flocks and herds.<sup>5</sup> Gordon, therefore, believes Abraham to be one of these traders rather than a mere bedawah. When Abraham sought to purchase a burial ground for Sarah, the Hittites said, "Thou art a mighty prince among us."<sup>6</sup> Gordon saw this statement as the Hittites' way of justifying a sale which normally would be open to question. The fact that Abraham's Ur is said to be "of the Chaldees" does not postulate a southern location, for Xenophon in the Anabasis mentions Chaldeans living in Armenia.<sup>7</sup> Opinion still favors a southern Ur, but further data could possibly call for a revision.

The third level of certainty with regard to data pertains to those items which elicit speculation rather than certainty. Perhaps the interpretation is based on some single item of evidence which gives rise to an interesting theory unsupported, however, by any other data. Examples are Woolley's conjecture that the clay deposit at Ur was made by Noah's flood, and Glueck's belief that Solomon had invented blast furnaces to smelt copper in his day. Both of these proposals were seen in a different light by other archaeologists, as we shall see later.

There is indeed a sense in which archaeological evidence is infallible. It is simply this: that no matter what may be found in the process of excavation, there is some valid reason why it is what it is and where it is. Therefore, field work must be carried on with great attention to the most minute details, and the recording of evidence must be with extreme accuracy; for these are the objective data which, in a sense, cannot lie.

From this point on, however, the subjective element enters the picture, and the steps in the archaeological process may involve error.

Employing all available evidence, the archaeologist must arrive at a conclusion concerning what he has found. It will be influenced by many factors besides the objective evidence. Among these will be the archaeologist's experience with other sites and with the specific cultures represented in the present site; his degree of familiarity with many disciplines such as history, language, anthropology and perhaps even physics and chemistry. He must draw upon his knowledge in many fields in order to integrate the scattered items of evidence and make them tell a coherent story.

But this is not all. Even the most objectively-minded interpreter cannot fully escape from his cultural, religious, and philosophical biases. The annals of archaeology are replete with examples where bias affected interpretation. From his childhood Heinrich Schliemann was determined to dig up the Troy of which Homer sang. Therefore, when he dug, he was convinced that he had found it, although later investigation revealed that the Troy he dug up far antedated the one which he was seeking.

The Tell el Amarna letters were a collection of clay tablets written in cuneiform or wedge-shaped characters. They were found in 1887 by an Egyptian woman prowling in a rubbish heap. Scholars refused to consider them because they knew that cuneiform writing and clay tablets were not used in ancient Egypt. Assuredly they must be spurious. It was Sir Wallis Budge who discovered that the letters consisted of international correspondence sent by kings in Palestine and the Fertile Crescent to the Egyptian Pharaoh. Bias has delayed for a time the importance of the discovery.

Again Minoan Linear B when first investigated showed signs of being some form of Greek, but it was deemed certain that the Greek language was not that old; therefore, the scholars wandered afield in their attempts at decipherment. By the perseverance of Michael Ventris was it finally shown that the Greek language was much older than had been believed.<sup>8</sup>

There has been frequent need for revision of theories in recent years. Much of this, perhaps, is due to the great amount of archaeological effort being put forth and the consequent volume of data brought to light. Today there is a strong demand for early reporting. A few decades ago, it was regarded as rather unscholarly to announce discoveries and draw conclusions except after exhaustive study of all that had been uncovered. Months and years might elapse before an official report was published. Today the demand is for comprehensive reports as early as possible, reserving the detailed technical treatment for a later time. This practice of early reporting is eagerly received, for there is a freshness and excitement about getting immediate data. But short-notice

reporting may call for a certain amount of conjecture; therefore, we must be willing to accept revision of theories when all the parts have been put together.

Sometimes revision has come without the need for additional data. Other scholars using the same data have come to a different conclusion. Such was the case with Woolley's flood layer, previously mentioned. Woolley was persuaded that an eight-foot layer of water-laid clay at Ur was the result of a single great inundation. Besides the fact that it appeared to be a single deposit, Woolley observed that those who settled the site after the flood buried their kings on what had been the rubbish heap of the pre-flood people--an indication that the former people had completely perished from memory.<sup>9</sup> But other competent observers attributed the clay deposit to the fact that the river had changed its course and flowed over the site for a long period, and this is the prevailing opinion now.

Nelson Glueck's blast furnaces provide another instance of reinterpretation of the same data. Glueck, working at Ezion-Geber, Solomon's industrial city on the Red Sea, discovered a building located in an open area where the northwest winds blew incessantly. There appeared to be funnels in the side of the building to conduct blasts of air. Glueck theorized that the building was a copper smelter employing the blast furnace--a principle not to be rediscovered until about one hundred years ago. No less a medium than the National Geographic Magazine<sup>10</sup> heralded Glueck's report and it became incorporated into many textbooks. However, Rothenberg<sup>11</sup> and others found a different explanation. When the building, which is now believed to have been a storehouse-granary, was burned, the heat from the cross-timbers embedded in the wall, crumbled the masonry, leaving funnel-shaped holes. Glueck himself was persuaded of this later and graciously retreated from his original position.<sup>12</sup>

There are frequent instances where the acquisition of new data has forced the revision of an earlier theory. Jericho, for example, has been dug up several times with varying conclusions concerning the evidence. Garstang, from his work begun in 1929, thought he had indeed found the walls of Joshua's Jericho, and he set the date of their fall at about 1400 B.C.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Kathleen Kenyon, however, excavating more recently, has dated the same walls much earlier. She reported that with a few exceptions all of Joshua's Jericho has been eroded away.<sup>14</sup>

The University of Chicago, in one of the most ambitious digs undertaken, excavated Megiddo and found what was then believed to be Solomon's stables and chariot houses which are mentioned in the Bible.<sup>15</sup> Yadin more recently has traced the stratum to other parts of the mound and is persuaded that the mangers and stables belong to a time later than Solomon, probably to that of Ahab.<sup>16</sup>

The acquisition of new data may not call for revision. Sometimes it only confirms the prevailing view. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were first found, there was considerable doubt that they were as old as Albright's appraisal. Constant acquisition of other scrolls, discovery of the Qumran Monastery, and other cave occupation has tended to bear out the accuracy of the original appraisals, however.

Many problems in Biblical research remain unsettled. This is disconcerting to many, for it is the nature of the human mind to avoid uncertainty and insecurity. A pronouncement one way or the other is seized upon to set the mind at rest. Nevertheless, sincerity in the quest for truth demands that we withhold judgment until sufficient evidence is obtained to reach a conclusion.

Sometimes, unhappily, the acquisition of new data only leads to greater confusion. The date of Israel's exodus from Egypt and conquest of the land is one of these knotty problems. Another long-standing puzzle which has been further complicated by more recent data has to do with the location of the walls of Jerusalem. Kathleen Kenyon has made an investigation of the north wall of Jerusalem and of the walls on Ophel, the old Jebusite city and the original city of David. Hennessy has given attention to the location of a south wall which was supposed to have joined the tip of Ophel to the Western Hill, thus enclosing the Pool of Siloam and the Tyropean Valley. As in the case of Joshua's walls at Jericho, so with the walls of Jerusalem, Miss Kenyon's discoveries have brought into question some long-entertained theories.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, now within the walls of the old city of Jerusalem is the traditional site of the crucifixion and burial of Christ as believed for centuries by the Roman and Greek churches as well as numerous Protestants. But many Protestants rejected the site on the grounds that it lay inside the walls of the city in Jesus' day. The traditionalists proposed that the north wall turned southward near what is now the Damascus Gate, forming a reentrant angle thus leaving the present site of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher outside of the city. Macalister years ago, employing deductive reasoning, demonstrated that the north wall surely must have gone directly west with no angle in it.<sup>17</sup> Miss Kenyon, resorting to the spade, found no wall running west. Furthermore, she found that Nehemiah's wall, constructed in fifty-two days, apparently did not embrace the western hill and that his wall on Ophel enclosed only a very restricted area.<sup>18</sup> If Kenyon reads the evidence correctly, the many gates of Jerusalem listed by Nehemiah must have been in quite different locations than has generally been assumed. Hennessy, too, could find no evidence of an Old Testament wall to the Western hill enclosing Siloam and the Tyropean Valley.

Are Miss Kenyon's conclusions correct? We can only wait and see. Hardly enough data have been accumulated as yet to place any view on unshakable ground. Meanwhile, our theory, tentative though it may be, must be framed in the light of our present knowledge.

In summary we may make the following observations:

1. The archaeologist employs the scientific method of obtaining facts; consequently, he endeavors to be as objective as possible.
2. Nevertheless, subjective factors must enter into the process of integration and interpretation of data. Because of this, as with any other science, the conclusions drawn from the observed data are subject to revision.
3. Awareness of this fact should prevent the Bible student from becoming disturbed when revision is necessary.
4. He should also be aware that conclusions based on archaeological discovery vary in reliability with the quality and quantity of objective data supporting them.
5. The sincere student should be ever willing to admit new data as evidence if they have been validly obtained, no matter how much they may tend to unseat a presently held theory. This is not to advocate a position of utter relativism. One may hold convictions concerning certain absolutes, but he should be aware that all of his convictions may not be absolutes. Some may be biases. The true absolutes will always stand the test of truth.
6. By the same token, in relating archaeological discovery to the exposition of the Bible, one must be careful not to overstate the case.
7. Even though not a specialist in archaeology, the Bible teacher or minister should, within the limits of his ability, try to evaluate the degree of certainty associated with an archaeological datum. He should weigh the source, the quality, and quantity of evidence supporting any given position. If it seems speculative, statements made pertaining to it should be so qualified.



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