

The Role of Archaeology in the Study Of the New Testament

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NEW TESTAMENT AND OLD TESTAMENT ARCHAEOLOGY COMPARED

Archaeology (from the Greek *archaios*, old, *ancient* and *logos* word, treatise, study) is a science devoted to the recovery of the remains of ancient civilizations with a view to reconstructing the story of their rise, progress, and fall. Considered in this aspect, archaeology is the handmaid of history, particularly of ancient history. It is the research department of all branches of learning that seek to expand man's knowledge of the past.

General archaeology undertakes the excavation, decipherment, and critical evaluation of the remains of ancient and human life on this planet wherever found. The more circumscribed field of Biblical archaeology confines itself to the study of the material remains of the lands and peoples that directly or indirectly affect the language and literature of the Bible, as well as its message and meaning. For the Old Testament the geographical area of interest centers in James Breasted's famous "fertile crescent," with one tip touching Palestine and the other extending to lower Iraq and the Persian Gulf, with the body of the moon comprising the middle and lower basin of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. For the New Testament the focus of activity falls in Palestine and fans out into the Graeco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean world of the first century A. D.

The fascination of Biblical archaeology for the student interested in expanding the scientific aspects of the study of the Bible is immense. No realm of research has offered more thrilling reward or afforded greater promise of continued progress.

There are, however, certain essential differences in the results of the application of archaeological research to the Old Testament as over against the New Testament. In the

Old Testament the impact has been much more obvious because ancient Bible history previous to the fifth century B. C. was much less known than the later Graeco-Roman period of Mediterranean history that underlies the New Testament. Old Testament archaeology has rediscovered whole nations, resurrected important peoples, and, in a most astounding manner, filled in historical gaps, adding immeasurably to the knowledge of Biblical backgrounds.¹

Although New Testament archaeology has not been called upon to perform such sensational feats, its importance is no less far-reaching and is becoming more significant each year. Dealing with a much shorter span of history (a bare century in contrast to several millennia of the Old Testament world), and concerned largely with smaller groups of individuals united by spiritual ties rather than with a whole nation like ancient Israel, held together by political bonds, archaeological data has been more difficult to apply to the New Testament than to the Old, but scarcely have they been less important or exciting.

The Greek New Testament as a historical document is of incalculable importance in the spiritual history and destiny of mankind. Historic, spiritually vitalized Christianity has always defined it in the highest terms and reposed implicit faith in its message and redemptive efficacy. As opposed to those who have questioned its inspiration, canonicity, or authority, it is assumed in this discussion: (1) that the New Testament is the inspired revelation of God to man though this has been denied by some modern critics.² The orthodox opinion on Biblical inspiration still remains that the New Testament (as well as the Old) is God-breathed and without error or mistake in the original autographs.³ (2) The New Testament is the capstone and consummation of the Old Testa-

¹Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and The Old Testament*, 1956, pp. 9-25.

²Kenneth Kantzer, "Revelation and Inspiration in Neo-Orthodox Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 115:120-27, April, 1958; 115:218-28, July, 1958; 115:302-12, October, 1958; Paul King Jewett, *Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation*, pp. 118-20, 158-72; John F. Walvoord, editor, *Revelation and Inspiration*, pp. 210-52.

³Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity*, 1956; Wick Broomall, *Biblical Criticism*, 1957, pp. 11-84.

ment revelation recounting not only the history of the founding of Christianity and containing the systematic exposition of the Christian faith, but bringing to fulfillment all the redemptive plans and promises made in the Old Testament.

THE PARTICULAR CONTRIBUTION OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

If the New Testament is what it is herein defined to be, and what history, fulfilled prophecy and the experience of redeemed humanity attest it to be, its own incalculable importance in degree attaches to every branch of research that can facilitate the study of it and contribute to its elucidation. In the forefront of such studies is the science of Biblical archaeology. In the New Testament field this comparatively young science (about a century and a half old in its broadest limits, but only a youngster of less than a half century in the sense of an exact science) is growing in significance year by year and constantly making new contributions to the better understanding of the New Testament on the human side.

1. *Archaeology Expedites the Scientific Study of the New Testament.* This is perhaps its most fundamentally significant contribution. While the Bible has always had the student who studies it from the aspect of its spiritual message and meaning, sacred Scripture in addition needs the technical expert—the trained linguist, grammarian, historian, geographer and textual critic. In this list of specialists in various phases of Biblical science, the archaeologist now takes a prominent and importance place.

Without the consecrated labors of Biblical technicians, knowledge of Scripture on the human plane (and the Bible is a human book as well as divine) would remain static or even suffer retrogression. This situation would soon affect the spiritual comprehension of Holy Writ, since the divine and human elements in Bible study interact and cannot be separated one from another or one neglected without adverse effect upon the other.

An example of archaeology aiding the scientific study of the New Testament is furnished in the field of textual crit-

icism. This fundamental area of research, which by the nature of the case is basic to all other study in this field, has been signally advanced during the past fifty years by new manuscript finds which have furnished technical scholars with added data for the evaluation and revision of the labors of textual critics, particularly the epochal work of Westcott and Hort.

Most recent official statistics list 2440 minuscule manuscripts, 232 uncials, 1678 lectionaries, 63 papyri, and 25 ostraca (potsherds).⁴ Particularly significant are the Chester Beatty papyri from the third century edited by Sir Frederic Kenyon in 1933-37. From a papyrus codex which originally contained all four gospel and the Acts, six leaves of Mark, seven of Luke and thirteen of Acts remain.⁵ From a papyrus codex which originally contained ten Pauline epistles eighty-six leaves are extant, and from another papyrus codex originally of the book of Revelation only the portion comprising chapters 9:10-17:2 has been preserved.

Of unical manuscripts the most important one discovered in the twentieth century is Codex W from the early fifth century and Codex Theta from the ninth century, both containing the four gospels. Of late other unical manuscripts have also been received.⁶

A whole new field of scientific investigation of the New Testament in recent years has been opened up by the recognition of the value of the Greek lectionaries. These aids to the study of the original text, designed by their compilers to supply readings for the liturgical year of the church, contain most of the New Testament except the Revelation and a portion of the Acts. They are shedding much light on the history of the transmitting of the New Testament text and furnish a valu-

⁴Ernest von Dobschuetz, *Eberhard Nestle's Einführung in das griechische Neue Testament*, vierte Auflage, 1923; *Zeitschrift fuer die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, XIII, 248-64; XXV, 299-306; XXXII, 185-206; Kurt Aland, *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 1953, pp. 465-96.

⁵F. G. Kenyon, *The Text of the Greek Bible, A Students' Handbook*, 1937.

⁶B. M. Metzger, "Recently Published Greek Papyri of the New Testament," *Smithsonian Report for 1948*, pp. 439-52; G. Maldfeld and B. M. Metzger, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 68:359-70, 1949.

able illustration of archaeology's ability to promote constructive scientific research of the Scriptures.

In the area of ancient versions of late years manuscript evidence has been supplemented making possible further progress in textual analysis. In addition, several versions not previously known have been brought to light.⁷ Interesting, and significant for textual criticism, is the discovery at Dura on the Euphrates of a parchment fragment of the Diatessaron of Tatian in Greek, belonging to the period just prior to the Roman garrison city's fall to the Persians in A. D. 256-57. Published in 1935, this bit of evidence settles once and for all the long debate whether or not Tatian's Harmony ever existed in Greek.

These textual advances have made feasible a constant stream of revisions of the Bible in the common languages of the peoples of Europe and America, besides giving impetus to scores and scores of translations for the mission fields of the globe.

Archaeology, in giving valuable aid in establishing a critical text, opens up the way for profitable research on the part of grammarian, the philologist, and the lexicographer. The remarkable recovery of papyri since about 1890, besides enabling scholars to evaluate the true character and literary nature of the New Testament,⁸ is immeasurably aiding the accurate understanding of the morphology (a study of the form of words), phonology (a study of their sound and pronunciation), and syntax (the relations of words to one another in the sentence) of the Greek of the New Testament. Moreover, in illustrating and thus elucidating the meaning of New Testament vocabulary in the light of the common language of the time, the papyri are thus rendering far-reaching service to the lexicographer, making possible great strides in this area.⁹

Of particular importance is the great *Theologisches Woer-*

⁷Bruce Metzger, "Bible Versions (Ancient)," *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia*, 1955, pp. 137-43.

⁸Adolph Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East*, third edition, 1927.

⁹Walter Gingrich, "Lexicons of the Greek New Testament," *Twenty Century Encyclopedia*, pp. 657-59.

terbuch zum Neuen Testament by Gerhard Kittel. This magnificent work (based on the earlier work of H. Cremer which was frequently revised since its appearance in 1866) promises to be a crowning achievement made possible by new archaeological discoveries expanding the horizons of Biblical knowledge. The majority of its seven volumes have already appeared. Since the death of Gerhard Kittel in 1948, the work has been continued by Gerhard Friedrich. Dealing only with words of theological import, it, however, is able to treat them much more accurately and fully than any of its great predecessors because of modern advance in research.

Of first-rate importance also is the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, translated and edited by Arndt and Gingrich and published by the University of Chicago (1958). This valuable work that employs the latest results of papyrological studies, renders obsolete such earlier lexicons as Thayer, Moulton and Milligan, and even Liddell and Scott.

2. *Archaeology acts as a balance in the critical study of the New Testament.* New Testament scholarship, like that of the Old Testament, has often been plagued with extremism. In the case of both, archaeology has frequently acted as a corrective and purge in showing the falsity of many erratic theories and false assumptions. This is true of the Old Testament. The simple reason for this is that incomparably less was known of the Old Testament backgrounds than was true of the New Testament before the advent of the science of Biblical archaeology in the nineteenth century. This situation gave more radically inclined higher critics greater range for extreme naturalistic views than was possible in the New Testament where a great deal was already known about its historical environment from abundant classical and other sources. Nevertheless, archaeological research has important bearings in balancing New Testament criticism.

To cite an example, the date of the Gospel of John is a case in point. According to the influential Tübingen School, founded by F. C. Baur, fewer than a half dozen books of the New Testament were written in the first century, thus being

effectually removed from authentic apostolic tradition. Until recently it has been popular in radical critical circles to posit a date for the Fourth Gospel not earlier than the first half of the second century. The school of form criticism since 1919¹⁰ has carried on this unsound practice of late-dating the gospels, particularly John, which is in a peculiarly vulnerable position, and which is supposed by these scholars to be devoid of any original historical matter and to reflect the beliefs and ideas of an early second-century Gnostic sect.

New archaeological finds are effectively counteracting these extreme views. A small papyrus fragment containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, published in 1935 and now in the John Rylands Library at Manchester, England, evidently constitutes the oldest known fragment of the New Testament. It is dated by competent palaeographers within the period A. D. 100-150.¹¹ The evidence it furnished at once exposes the untenableness of the Tübingen School and the contentions of many of the form critics. Added to this, the Qumran Documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls since 1947 show that the supposed second-century gnostic ideas of John's gospel are authentic to first century Jewish sectarian life and thought and substantiate the traditional first-century date of John's gospel within the apostolic period.¹² Likewise numerous geographical and topographical allusions in the Fourth Gospel have been vindicated against the critical charge of adoption or later inventions.¹³

Another example of archaeology's role in balancing New Testament criticism is the abandonment of the claim often made that Christianity has been highly influenced by the mystery religions. In the heyday of the *religionsgeschichtliche*

¹⁰M. Dibelius, *Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 1919; second edition, 1933; English translation, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 1935. R. Bultman, *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*, 1921, second edition, 1931; L. J. McGinley, *Form Criticism of the Synoptic Healing Narratives*, 1944.

¹¹C. H. Roberts who published the fragment in 1935 and H. I. Bell, A. Deissmann, W. H. P. Hatch and F. G. Kenyon.

¹²Merrill F. Unger, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Amazing Archaeological Discoveries*, 1957; F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1956; W. F. Albright, *The Bible after Twenty years of Archaeology; Religion in Life*, 21:4:547-59, autumn, 1952.

¹³W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, 1949, pp. 244-49.

Schule this was a popular contention. However, discoveries of the past generation in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt have caused the pendulum to swing back to a more balanced position and have gone far to demonstrate the uniqueness of early Christianity as a historical phenomenon. Instead of Christianity turning out to be only one of many various sects of similar nature which professedly proliferated in the eastern part of the Roman Empire in the first century A.D., as was the contention in former decades, it appears as a unique historical phenomenon, like the religion of Israel which preceded it.

Excavations in Bible lands have uncovered no documents or buildings belonging to such alleged sects. Dura on the Euphrates has yielded heathen temples, a Christian chapel, a Jewish synagogue, a Mithraeum, as well as fragments of Jewish and Christian writings, but nothing has turned up belonging to any other comparable religious group. Numberless synagogues, churches, and pagan temples have been found in Syria and Palestine, but there is a conspicuous absence of other religious structures. Egypt has yielded early written evidence of Jewish, Christian, and pagan religion. It has preserved works of Manichaeism and other Gnostic sects, but these are all considerably later than the rise of Christianity. The total array of archaeological evidence thus presents the Christian faith as unique as a historical phenomenon, like the faith of Israel that preceded it and formed the indispensable introduction to it.

3. *Archaeology illustrates and explains the New Testament.* Perhaps the most striking example of this contribution of archaeology again comes from the papyri. The great mass of documents in the vernacular Greek which has come to light in ever increasing quantity, besides illustrating New Testament language and literature, expands the horizons of Biblical history, furnishing vastly augmented knowledge of the life of the common people of the Hellenistic era in Egypt as well as elsewhere in the Graeco-Roman world. Economic, cultural and social conditions of the New Testament period are now much better understood.

Since 1930 exciting papyri finds from the second century

A. D., including a whole library of lost Gnostic literature from the third and fourth centuries discovered since 1947 at Schoenoboskion in Upper Egypt, supply invaluable information concerning the theological and religious environment of early Christianity. It is now evident that the Gnostics of the early church had stranger and more pernicious doctrines than critical scholarship had formerly attributed to them. The new material shows how unsustained such criticism was in attempting to identify Gnostic tenets with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Besides it gives point to numerous solemn New Testament warnings against such dangerous doctrinal aberrations.

To cite other examples of archaeological illustration and elucidation, digging at various places may be mentioned. Excavations at New Testament Jericho since 1950 have facilitated the understanding of the Biblical references.¹⁴ The forum of the Roman city with a grand facade facing the Wadi Quelt has been uncovered. At Delphi an inscription has been found which makes it possible to date the arrival of the procounsul Gallis at Corinth in the summer of A. D. 51 and to conclude that Paul came to the city at the beginning of A. D. 50. The Rome of Paul's time has been revealed by excavations showing temples, theatres, forum, aqueducts and other sites doubtless familiar to the apostle.

Corinth, Athens, Philippi, Ephesus, and other cities evangelized by Paul are now much better known as a result of archaeological excavation. The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (Acts 19:27) came to light after long search. The theatre is also now known although the remains probably date later than Paul's time. Palestine of Christ and the whole Graeco-Roman world of Paul and the apostles are put in a new light by archaeological research and lend the evidence they furnish to the illustration and elucidation of the pages of the New Testament.

4. *Archaeology supplements the New Testament.* An example is furnished by added light on the important era from the accession of Herod the Great (B. C. 37) to the fall of

¹⁴Cf. Matt. 20:29; Mark 10:46; Luke 10:30; 18:35; 19:1.

Jerusalem to the Romans (A. D. 70). This period is now far better known as a result of archaeological research than it was in the nineteenth century with many gaps in our information happily filled in. Most significant of discoveries affecting the environment of Jesus, John the Baptist, and the early apostles are the Dead Sea Scrolls. These valuable documents, especially the recovered literature of the Essene-type of sect which flourished at Qumran in the wilderness area near the Dead Sea area southwest of Jericho since 1947, have revolutionized knowledge of sectarian Judaism of the time and set forth in clear focus the prognostic milieu of thought and language in which Jesus and John the Baptist grew up.¹⁵

Another illustration of archaeology's ability to fill in gaps in historical knowledge is found in the evidence it affords of the thoroughness of the interruption not only of Jewish communal life in Palestine as a result of the first revolt of A. D. 66-70 but of disruption of Christian communities as well. The completeness of the catastrophe involved in the destruction of Jerusalem is seen in the fact that not a single synagogue of the early Roman period has apparently survived. Contrary to common contention Jewish communal life was not resumed at Jerusalem. Not a single one of the numerous Jewish tombs in the region of Jerusalem can be dated to the period after A. D. 70. All inscribed ossuaries hitherto found in the vicinity of Jerusalem belong to the period 30 B. C. to A. D. 70.

Christians suffered even more than the rest of the Jewish population of Palestine, since they were indiscriminately treated as Jews by their pagan neighbors and persecuted by Jews as well. Before the last Roman invasions of Judaea the Christian remnant fled from Jerusalem to Pella. Understanding the scope of the disaster that befell Jerusalem, which archaeology helps to make clear, has important bearings on New Testament criticism and in New Testament interpretation as well.¹⁶

5. *Archaeology authenticates the New Testament.* Since

¹⁵Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1955, pp. 123-37.

¹⁶Cf. W. F. Albright, *Archaeology of Palestine*, 1949, p. 242.

the background of the New Testament is recorded in the contemporary history of the Graeco-Roman world, of which there exists a fair knowledge, classical historians and critics have always been tempted to measure swords with the New Testament in the matter of its historical, geographical, and literary authenticity. While difficulties still persist, archaeology has in numerous cases vindicated the New Testament, particularly Luke.¹⁷ The Acts of the Apostles is now generally agreed in scholarly circles to be the work of Luke, to belong to the first century, and to involve the labors of a careful historian who was substantially accurate in his use of sources. Attempts to impugn Luke's reliability have constantly been made, but most of these have been rendered futile by light from the monuments of antiquity and the archaeologist's spade.¹⁸

The role which archaeology is performing in New Testament research (as well as in that of the Old Testament) in expediting scientific study, balancing critical theory, illustrating, elucidating, supplementing, and authenticating historical and cultural backgrounds, constitutes the one bright spot in the future of criticism of the Sacred Oracles. The unanswerable evidence of the archaeologist's spade is bound not only to make Scripture better understood on the human plane, but also better respected on the same plane by scholars who will not recognize the supernatural in history and whose only creed is pure science.

¹⁷Cf. A. T. Robertson, *Luke The Historian in the Light of Research*, 1920, pp. 1-241.

¹⁸Cf. the works of Sir William Ramsay, *St. Paul The Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, 1897. *The Cities of St. Paul* (1907 reprint 1949). *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (4th ed. 1920; reprint 1953).