

Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 18

Relation of Archaeology to Bible History

IV. The Relation of Archaeology to Bible History

We come to a new section this afternoon, Roman numeral IV, “The Relation of Archaeology to Bible History.” I have inserted this section between our discussion of Genesis 11 and our discussion of Genesis 12 and following because when you get to Genesis 12 with Abraham you are in the period of time where archaeology has a bearing on the biblical material. Prior to the time of Abraham you’re really in that period where there isn’t extra biblical historical data that relates to the biblical data. So I think at this point it’s good to reflect a bit on archaeology and some of its methods, benefits and uses.

A. A General Survey of Biblical Archaeology, Its History and Methods

B. The Role of Archaeology in Assessing the Historical Statements of the Bible

You’re reading Dr. Allan McRae’s book and in fact on Roman numeral IV capital A is “A General Survey of Biblical Archaeology, its History and Methods.” I’m not going to do that in class lecture. I’m leaving that for your reading of the McRae booklet to fill in at least a brief summary of the history and methods of archaeological research. What I do want to treat is B, “The Role of Archaeology in Assessing the Historical Statements of the Bible,” because I think it’s important to deal with methodology. How do we deal with archaeology? What’s its function in relation to our biblical studies? I’ll begin there with B, “The Role of archaeology in Assessing the Historical Statements of the Bible.” Certainly archaeology has done a great deal to increase our understanding of the Bible I don’t think there’s any question about that. We know a lot more about biblical times today than we did a hundred years ago because of the results of archaeological research, but I think it’s important to put the role of archaeological research in biblical studies into proper perspective. What I mean by that is, what is it that archaeology can and cannot do? I think sometimes too much importance has been given to archaeology. It is important and I don’t want to minimize that, but sometimes too much importance has

been given to archaeology and that's done from two radically different perspectives.

You will find that often critical scholars, who don't have a view of the historical trustworthiness of Scripture, will use archaeology to suggest that statements in the biblical texts that are not confirmed by archaeological findings are suspect and in some cases it is said that archaeological findings have proved that the Bible is inaccurate and what's recorded there didn't actually happen. That's on one side of the coin from the critical approach where they either consider a statement suspect or say there are historical inaccuracies because of the findings of archaeological research.

On the other hand, you have conservative scholars who have utilized archaeological research as proof of the Bible's accuracy. There are a number of handbooks that suggest that archaeology has proven the Bible to be true. In some instances, I think the archaeological evidence has corroborated and substantiated biblical statements. There are also cases, however, where conservative scholars have claimed archaeology has shown us that the Bible is true when it's turned out later that this particular interpretation of the archaeological data has been modified, changed or reversed. The use to which it was being put then no longer really holds because the interpretation of the data was something that was possibly questionable or later, with more evidence, the data has been reinterpreted or revised.

So, I think it's important that we don't elevate archaeological research to a position where "scientific results" rule over the Scripture in an unwarranted way, especially in the interpretation of Scripture. Archaeological findings do not always provide the last word on questions of historical interpretation and I think there's a misconception there. People often ask: "did this really happen or not?" Then propose, "Let's go to the archaeologist, let's let the archaeologist tell us the answer."

It is important to realize in many cases, not in every case, but in many cases archaeologists do not speak with unanimity in their own conclusions. In other words, one archaeologist is going to say with respect to the interpretation of certain findings that this is what it means and another archaeologist is going to say something else. There is not unanimity on many cases of interpretation of data by archaeologists themselves. So it's

not as if in some unified way archaeology tells us something. It is more complex than that. That being the case, I think we need to develop an understanding on how archaeology can function as an aid in biblical studies and interpretation. It really can be of use but we need to understand how it can do that without either expecting too much from it, on the one hand, or minimizing its importance, on the other hand. You can go both directions with it. What you need is a critical balance kind of understanding of how archaeological data can function in biblical interpretation. We need to have carefulness in drawing conclusions from archaeological finds as it relates to Scripture.

Now in view of that, I want to call your attention to two things that are posted as 1. and 2 on your outline sheet. I think there are two principals here that go a long way on helping us get the correct perspective. I think these are very important. One is that archaeological evidence is of necessity very fragmentary in nature. Just by the character of what it is, it's never going to be complete. It is very fragmentary. Secondly, the interpretation of archaeological evidences in many cases are only tentative.

1. Archaeological Evidence is of Necessity Very Fragmentary in Nature

So let's look at these two things. First, "Archaeological Evidence is of Necessity very Fragmentary in Nature." Just because of the nature of the discipline itself we can be certain that we will only have available a fraction of the evidence that we might desire to have at our disposal on any given question as far as archaeological evidence is concerned. That principal is important because of what I mentioned earlier. There are those who will conclude that a biblical statement is suspect if it is not confirmed by archaeological data. Now if the nature is inherently fragmentary, then we shouldn't demand such confirmations. Therefore the idea that something is suspect because we don't have evidence or proof that it is invalid.

Now in your bibliography, page 12, the first three entries are some articles and books of Edwin Yamauchi who is a professor of history at Miami University in Ohio. He is an evangelical historian very much interested in the archaeology of the ancient Near East. In his article "The Stone, Scripts and Scholars" as well as in chapter four of the next

book *The Stones and the Scriptures*. And in the article on “Archaeological Confirmation Suspect Elements in Classical and Biblical Traditions,” he develops a line of reasoning that I want to use here in our own discussion and that’s basically this, the fragmentary nature of archaeological evidence. He points out the following things, only a fraction of what is made or has been written ever survives. Now that can be illustrated in a lot of ways. Perishable materials such as papyri which was used in the ancient world to write on in many instances has simply disintegrated and disappeared. It’s not durable. So inscriptions in many cases have not survived. It’s reasonable to expect that the kings of Israel and Judah erected stone stelae with inscriptions on them similar to the kings of Moab. We have the Moabite stone. But king Mesha of Moab had a stone inscription on it which was found. We have copies of that stone in the Louvre in Paris. So it’s reasonable to expect that Israelite kings have made similar inscriptions but none of them have been found. If they did make them they haven’t yet been discovered yet or they may have been destroyed and disappeared through time. There’s only one fragment of an Israelite stela containing a single word just a small piece with one word that’s ever been found.

Another example is there were hundreds of synagogues in Palestine in the New Testament era but only one synagogue from before 70 AD has been discovered, the one in Capernaum, the rest, which we’re certain there were many, have not been discovered. Now there are a lot of illustrations of that sort of thing but only a fraction of what is made or what has been written survives.

Part of the reason why you don’t find the remains of buildings like synagogues is because it was common practice for people in the ancient world to take the materials from an old building and use it to build a new building so that the source of building material comes from previous buildings and they are just picked up and removed and put somewhere else and there is no trace then of the original building. Then you have all the natural forces of erosion, decay and all that sort of thing that do their destructive work as well. So only a fraction of what is made and what is written survives.

2. Fraction of Sites Have Been Surveyed and Identified

Secondly only a fraction of the available sites in Canaan or the Holy Land have ever been surveyed meaning that they have been identified as archaeological sites. In 1944 the Palestine gazette listed a total of about 3000 sites in the area west of the Jordan and several hundred in trans-Jordan so in 1944 there were about 3000 identified archaeological sites. In 1963 the total of known sites had increased to about 5000 largely because of surveys by Nelson Glueck, I think you read about him in McRae that was 1963 in 1966 and 1967 there were some surveys done in the Negev, that's in the south, that turned up about 200 new sites. Then in 1967/68 there were surveys in the Golan Heights after the capture of that territory and some additional sites were found there. Moshi Kakabi director of that survey said, "our survey of Judea surveyed about 1200 sites of which some 20 to 30 percent are new sites previously unrecorded. I estimate that not more than a third of the amount possible sites were recorded and a thorough survey is a question of many years including the yet unsurveyed parts of pre-war Israel." So you can see that it is an enormous number of sites certainly 3000+ of identified archaeological sites in Palestine.

3. Only a Fraction of the Surveyed Sites Have Been Excavated

3. Only a Fraction of the Surveyed Sites have been Excavated. In 1963 Paul Lapp estimated that of 5000 sites in Palestine there have been scientific excavations done at about 150 sites. You see there is where you start getting into the numbers and you can easily have the idea that there is an enormous amount of archaeological work being done and there is, but compared to the potential its only a small fraction. You see of 5000 sites 150 sites have been excavated. Of the 150 only 26 are major excavations where they have really done a thorough job and even in those cases it's not a 100%. In other words, there have been only 26 major excavations. Now Lapp says to be sure many of the sites on record would not merit extensive excavation, but if only one in four were promising major excavations have till now been carried out on only two percent of the potential sites. So you see only a fraction of what was made or written survives, a fraction of

available sites have been surveyed and then only a fraction of the surveyed sites have ever been excavated.

4. A Fraction of Any Excavated Site Has Actually Been Examined

Now with few exceptions only a fraction of any excavated site has actually been examined. There are exceptions to that of course. You have the small short lived kinds of sites like the Qumran community which is in a relatively small area and was not inhabited for a long period of time. That has been completely excavated and you have the site of Masada west of the Dead Sea where the Jews held out against the Romans around 73 AD. It was short lived and small and that's been pretty much completely excavated. But for the most part when you excavate a site you don't completely excavate the entire site. So with few exceptions, only a fraction of any excavated site has actually been examined.

Now some of the exceptions to that beside the short lived small sites are Megiddo for example which in the years between 1925 and 1934 was excavated by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. The idea of that excavation, which was a major excavation, was to take the site of Megiddo, a fairly good sized site, and completely work down through the entire mound or "tel," as they are called, layer by layer. They were successful in removing the top four strata of the mound but that was eventually abandoned because it's an enormous undertaking to do something like that and something on that scale hasn't been attempted ever since. But that means that any excavation is almost bound to miss important finds because what they will do is select a section where they think that maybe there was a gate to the city here or an important building there and they will dig in at that place. They may be right and they may be wrong and they're bound to miss things.

Yamauchi points out in his article that even in an expensive excavation like Megiddo, it's embarrassing to report that a cuneiform text of the Gilgamesh epic was found by shepherds in the discarded debris from the excavations of Megiddo. You know it's rather amazing because excavation techniques are done with such care. The point is,

if you get a clay tablet with cuneiform markings on it, that's buried in the mud, it's very difficult to tell that clay tablet from a piece of dirt or a stone. Probably what happened there was that they were digging the stuff out and it was missed and put on a pile, then rain came and washed some of the mud and dirt off and then you could see what it was. But in any case a very important text, even in a carefully excavated site, was missed and was found in the debris. So it's that kind of situation.

Hazor

John Garstang who excavated a number of places in Palestine concluded from his work at Hazor in 1928 that the site was not an important city in the 13th and 14th century B.C. because he did not find any Mycenaean I pottery, which is a certain type of pottery. If it had been occupied during the 13th to 14th centuries B.C. there should have been Mycenaean pottery there. The book of Joshua says, that when the Israelites came in under Joshua's leadership and went to the north and fought in Hazor, they destroyed the city. It was the major city in the north. It was occupied during the time of Joshua. Garstang didn't find any Mycenaean pottery so he said it was not an important city at that time. They frequently use pottery to date levels and artifacts.

Well in more recent times the site has been re-excavated or excavated further, and Yadin the Israeli archaeologist has found floors littered with Mycenaean pottery. So you see in drawing the conclusion the first time because he didn't find something was invalidated because later it was found that the very thing that he hadn't found was nevertheless there. Yadin later found a lot of Mycenaean pottery. Now Hazor is a very large site as far as Canaanite sites go. There's an upper city and a lower city. The upper city is about 30 acres and the lower city about 175 acres. You're talking of a site of about 200 acres, which as far as cities go today, is not a very big city, but if you want to excavate something like that, that's a big job. Yadin worked with over 30 archaeologists, he had a large staff and a crew of a hundred or more laborers. He managed to clear 1/400th of the site in four seasons. That is 1/16th hundred per season from 1955-1958 and he suggested it would take 800 years of about four to five months work, work is usually

done in the summer to clear the entire site. So obviously that's not going to be done, or it's highly unlikely that it will ever be done. Just project that kind of problem onto larger sites. If you go to Babylon that covers 2500 acres instead of 200, Nineveh covers 1850 acres. So at Yadin's estimation for Hazor it would take about 8000 years to excavate Babylon in a complete way.

5. Only a Fraction of the Materials and Especially the Inscriptions Produced by an Excavation Have Been Published

Five, "Only a Fraction of the Materials and Especially the Inscriptions Produced by an Excavation Have Been Published." Because of the scarcity of people who have the training to decipher and translate these languages and publish, the texts that are written in cuneiform in a variety of different scripts and languages. There is a great time lag between the discovery of the text and their publication. A Babylonian king list acquired in 1880's by the British museum was published in 1954 so you go from 1880 to 1954 and it was about a 75 year time lag between when the artifacts were actually dug up and when they were published. The Lipit Ishtar law code was excavated by the University of Pennsylvania in the late 18 hundreds and it lay on the shelves at the university museum in Philadelphia until Francis R. Steel recognized the significance of this tablet in 1947 and published this law code. Francis R. Steel happens to be an evangelical scholar. He was a curator or assistant curator at the university museum in the 1950's and he has subsequently left that and I think he was director of the North African missions and I think recently retired. But he published a translation of the Lipit Ishtar code but it had been in the museum there for 60 or 70 years before he came on it.

The present curator of Akkadian language at the University of Pennsylvania museum says with few exceptions western museums have still not caught up to the flow of antiquities. Their basements and store rooms are full of undiscovered treasures in the field of Assyriology of course we rely almost entirely on existing collections of cuneiform tablets rather than on new excavations. We have absorbed such a small percentage of the hundreds of thousands of tablets in museums that new discoveries are

almost routine in a tablet collection the size of the one at the university museum every drawer holds a surprise the only problem we have is which drawer to open. There's such a back log of material. Due to the lack of funding and lack of expertise of people who work with that material there's just an enormous amount of it that hasn't been looked at even though its been excavated.

Samuel Kramer was the Professor of Sumeriology at the University of Pennsylvania estimates that about ten percent of the approx. 500,000 cuneiform texts that have been excavated have ever been published. That's probably a good guess about ten percent of the material that has been excavated has ever been published. At Mari, a city in Mesopotamia near Babylon 25,000 texts were discovered, and only 2,800 have been published. Of the tablets found at Eshnuna between 1930 and 1936 most of them have not been published. The laws of Eshnuna have been published but most of the texts have not. Leonard Woolley excavated at Ur, Ur of the Chaldees in southern Mesopotamia in the 1930's. The publication is still not complete and is still going on. So we have to remember that only a fraction of the materials and especially the inscriptions produced by excavations have been published.

Yamauchi's Circles of Evidence

Yamauchi diagrams this situation in this way. He speaks in what he calls circles of evidence. He divides it into three circles of evidence. You have the biblical text or you would have the literary material if you're not talking about the biblical text, you could be talking about other classical literary texts. Then you have literary remains and material remains. Archaeological findings are basically of two types material remains that is buildings, monuments, pottery, statues, things of that sort and literary remains which would be writings on various kinds of materials, legal documents, letters, court annals, poems, all types of literary remains. Some possible combinations, you can have material which is for the most part what you will find in the biblical text that is not touched by either literary or material remains, and you can have material remains or literary remains that have no external corroboration from one of the other circles of evidence. Then you

can have an overlap between material remains and biblical texts. Some reference to a wall or city or whatever. You find it in material remains and the biblical text. The same with literary remains, you can find some sort of extra biblical written thing that corroborates something that's in biblical text, perhaps from an Assyrian king that said he took tribute from an Israelite king and the biblical text says the same thing. Where you will find both literary, material and biblical text overlapping is relatively rare. Now those aren't drawn with the idea of any kind of exact percentages but I think the concept is important, and particularly a thing that is important that you don't expect an overlap with the majority of the material because of the nature of the evidence that you're dealing with. So to get back to where we began by the nature of the discipline itself we will only have available a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of the potential available evidence that we might wish to have.

1. Darius the Mede – It is Not a Valid Procedure to Assume that a Biblical Statement is Suspect if it Doesn't Find Corroboration in Archaeological Findings

Now with that in mind, certainly it is not a valid procedure to assume that a biblical statement is suspect if it doesn't find corroboration in archaeological findings. We shouldn't expect corroboration for everything, in fact we shouldn't expect corroboration. An example of this sort of thing which is very frequently referred to is that in the book of Daniel you have reference to Darius the Mede. There is no extra biblical corroboration of Darius the Mede. The conclusion of many critical scholars is that whoever wrote the book of Daniel didn't know his history and that it is inaccurate and that Darius the Mede never existed. Now exactly who Darius the Mede was has garnered several suggestions, some suggesting that it is another name for Cyrus, some think that it was a governor that Cyrus appointed. There are various proposals for that but you see the principle involved is that just because we don't have extra biblical corroboration for the existence of Darius the Mede is no reason to conclude that Darius the Mede did not exist. Yamauchi points out that if we had to depend on inscriptional evidence to prove the historicity of Pontius Pilate we would have had to wait until 1961 when the first

epigraphical documentation concerning him was discovered in Caesarea. So we can't jump to the conclusion without corroboration a biblical statement is suspect. The first epigraphical attestation of Herod the Great was discovered in 1963-65. Any questions on "archaeological evidences of necessity is very fragmentary in nature." You see the implications of that.

2. The Interpretation of Archaeological Evidence is in Many Cases Only Tentative

Secondly, "the interpretation of archaeological evidence is in many cases only tentative." Now I think that is another very important principle because it's often the case that interpretation of archaeological evidence is subject to revision or reinterpretation in the light of additional evidence. That means that with the interpretation of archaeological evidence you have to be very careful. It's an area where caution is extremely important and I think that that has application in the area both with respect to what certain critics have claimed shows the Bible to be inaccurate or historically unreliable from archaeological evidence, as well as those things which conservative scholars have used to say proves the accuracy of Scripture. I think the thing to keep in mind here is that different types of archaeological evidence have to be read with different degrees of certainty concerning their interpretation. There are different types of evidence and interpretations of the evidence depending on the type of evidence. It may range from doubtful, to possible, to probable, to certain, a whole spectrum, depending on the nature of the evidence. Now some things can be quite clear. You can get a written statement that leaves very little to interpretation as it is quite clear what it says. But you can unearth some building or structure and not be sure what it is. When there is nothing written you don't know exactly what the date of it is, you don't know exactly who built it, you don't know exactly what the purpose of the thing was, you have to be careful about the interpretation of that kind of material.

Example from 1 Kings 9:15, 19 – Solomon's Stables/Storehouses

Now to illustrate that in 1 Kings 9:15 and 19 we read the account of the forced

labor. 1 Kings 9:15, King Solomon conscripted to build the Lord's temple, his own palace, the terraces, the wall of Jerusalem and Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer. Verse 19, you read he built these various places and then as well as all his store cities and the towns for his chariots and horses. Whatever he desired to build in Jerusalem and Lebanon and throughout all the territory he ruled. Over in chapter 10 verse 26, you read "Solomon accumulated chariots and horses. He had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. The king made silver in Jerusalem as common as stones, cedar as plentiful as sycamore fig trees in the foothills, Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt and from Que. The royal merchants purchased them from Que, they imported the chariots from Egypt for 600 shekels of silver and a horse for 150. They exported them to all of the kings of the Hittites and Arameans. Now what we find from those texts is that Solomon traded in horses and chariots. He seems to be a middleman in that trade. And he built up his own military establishment with chariots and horses.

Megiddo was one of his important building sites. You read that in 1 Kings 9:15. Megiddo was also, as we have already noticed, one of those sites that's been rather carefully excavated by the University of Chicago's, Oriental Institute. Those excavations began in 1925, with the idea of being able to work down through the entire mound or tel, as I mentioned a few minutes ago. What they found was that in the first layer there were ruins from the time of the Persian and Babylonian empires. That's on the top, about the sixth century B.C. The second layer had evidence of Assyrian rule, which would be about the eighth century. And then layers three and four were the Israelite period prior to Assyrian domination of the Northern Kingdom. After a number of years of digging, they came to what they concluded was the time of Solomon in that Israelite period. In that layer, they found the remains of some strange buildings, the unique feature of which was rows of stone pillars. You've probably seen pictures of this in any handbooks on Bible archaeology, these rows of stone pillars with holes in them near the top of the pillar. The director of the excavation came to the conclusion that the buildings were stables and that the pillars were hitching posts for the horses, which at the same time were used for roof

supports. The holes were holes through which the horses could be tied to those pillars and at the same time they served as roof supports. Now that's often referred to as Solomon's stables at Megiddo, you will find it in almost any archaeological handbook. It's said it corroborated Solomon's chariot cities recorded in 1 Kings 9:19, Solomon's trade in chariots and horses, in 1 Kings 10:26-29, and Solomon's building operation at Megiddo in 1 Kings 9:15. Now the interesting thing is today the whole thesis is under question because of a reinterpretation of the evidence in question.

In 1970 James Pritchard wrote an article "The Megiddo's stable reassessment in early Near eastern archaeology of the 20th century." He among other people have reviewed the evidence and have abandoned the previous conclusion on the basis of further studying and more complete evidence. The reason for the change was a number of things, the first of which was the dating of the level in question for various reasons that gets quite technical. Pritchard and others felt that the level in question belonged to the time of Ahab and not the time of Solomon. So you're not even talking about the time of Solomon. You see you're getting into this area of the interpretation of evidence, it's difficult. Then in addition Pritchard proposed that the buildings were not stables on the basis of similar buildings found in other places. He concluded that they were store houses or barracks. The holes had nothing to do with hitching posts. It had to do with the structural support of the upper part of the building. So I think that's one illustration of why you have to be careful in interpretation of archaeological data.

In another article Pritchard says, the second article by Pritchard, "Culture and History in the Bible and Modern Scholarship," pages 313 to 324, on page 315 of that article Pritchard says, "Rarely if ever do historical judgments emerge from the ground. They're usually deduced by archaeologists from observed evidence. Such tangible objects as pots, walls, floors, etc take on meaning for history only as the context in which they are found can be controlled, identified, and related to other contexts by the excavator and his colleague. This process of interpretation involves opinion, common sense, and logic. To remember these human variables the components of any archaeological equation is to guard against an unwarranted authoritarianism." In other words, what he's

saying is these answers to these historical questions just don't pop out of the ground. Archaeologists have to work with the material and they have to make judgments, their opinions come into play, and there's a lot of tentative conclusions that are drawn and you have to be careful in using those conclusions.

Solomon's Copper Mines

There's another illustration of a shift, in interpretation of a rather familiar finding of archaeology with respect to corroboration of biblical material. This one has to do with the discovery of what is known as Solomon's copper mines and smelting furnaces. In the late 1930's Nelson Glueck explored the area south of the Dead Sea near Eziongeber. Eziongeber is right on the coast of northern arm of the Red Sea near the cities of Aqabah or Elat. What he discovered there was that there were rich veins of copper and iron ore in that territory. He found that that ore was mined during the time of Solomon and even later. He found remains of copper molds, copper slags, all around that area near Eziongeber. Glueck expected to find ruins there of Solomon's seaport. If you look at 1 Kings 9:26 you read King Solomon built ships at Eziongeber which is near Elath on the shore of the Red Sea. Hiram of Lebanon sent his men, sailors, into the sea to serve in the fleet with Solomon. He was looking for some kind of evidence of the navy that Solomon had established there at Eziongeber. He didn't find it. But he did find what he thought was a smelting furnace or refinery. Even though he didn't find evidence of a seaport there, it's reasonable to conclude that Solomon was involved in copper smelting and perhaps he was using the copper smelting in his trade for bringing things back and then taking them across the desert to Jerusalem but we'll get into some of that later. But what he thought was the smelting furnace seems to have turned out to be something else as well. Reinterpretation of evidence. But we'll look at more details of that tomorrow.

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