

# **Dr. Jonathan Greer, Old Testament Archaeology, Session 1, Introduction to Archaeology and the Old Testament**

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This is Dr. Jonathan Greer and his teaching on Archaeology in the Old Testament. This is session 1, Introduction to Archaeology and the Old Testament.

Greetings, my name is Jonathan Greer.

I teach here at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. I get to teach Old Testament, but I also have a specific interest in archaeology. And so, I have the privilege and pleasure today to talk about two things near and dear to me.

The Bible, particularly the Old Testament and archaeology. So, I also have some experience not just in teaching the Old Testament but also in the field. I participate in excavations at Tel Dan in Northern Israel, with a particular focus on the identification and analysis of animal bones or zoo archaeology.

Here at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, we have a laboratory where we continue to work on faunal remains and animal bones from Tel Dan. So, you'll hear a few references to animal bones in our lecture here. But I want to begin with talking about what is archaeology? And then we'll talk about what is the Bible? And then we'll see how these two fit together, sometimes comfortably, sometimes uncomfortably.

What is archaeology? Well, just to get right to what I know you all are thinking, this is it, right? Indiana Jones. And if you're of a certain generation, you have to admit Indy had an influence on all of us. So, I was a kid in junior high.

My dad took a sabbatical to Jerusalem and took the whole family. And it was right after this movie came out. And so, I did indeed have a hat and a bullwhip and was looking for the lost Ark in my backyard, unsuccessfully.

And then, as I grew and began to study archaeology more on a professional level, I realized it's far more nerdy. But the good news is nobody's shooting at you. But archaeology is far more nerdy and much less glamorous.

In fact, we might even call it sophisticated dumpster diving. We work through the material remains of humankind's past, basically going through their trash. We're looking at broken bits of pottery.

We're looking at animal bone remains that they've spit out of their mouths from their stews. We're looking at residues and analyzing, even at the microscopic level, some of the things that they used to eat. So, we're going through the trash of ancient peoples and trying to reconstruct, or some would say construct, the different life ways that they engaged in.

Different processes change over time. We dip into areas of history. We look at trying to recreate some of the ways that ancient peoples were thinking.

So, if we talk about a working definition, we might say that archaeology has basically three elements to it. The first is recovery, the second is examination, and the third is interpretation. So, recovery, examination, and interpretation of the material and biological remains of humankind's past.

Today, archaeology is very much an interdisciplinary endeavor. Long gone are the days, especially in biblical archaeology, where one would just have the Bible in one hand and the spade in the other. Now, many archaeologists are employing sophisticated methods of recording from GPS, photogrammetry, and satellite imagery, and then also that's on a high level.

And then, as we get into the dirt, we're analyzing not just traditional pots and bones, but now we have information that we can draw from the hard sciences to analyze at an even more specific level. So, pottery, for instance, we can tell from residue analysis what was cooked in that pot. When we're talking about animal bones, we can take a tooth and, through isotopic analysis, tell where that animal grazed during its lifetime.

Teeth, like trees, take on rings or accretions of layers that can be analyzed. Based on what type of plants are in particular regions, we can find out the grazing history of this animal until its time of death. We can also look at residues in the soil for phytoliths, for different mineral elements that can tell us something of the processes that took place in that space long ago.

Sophisticated dating methods. Radiocarbon dating is still our most solid dating method for looking at material or organic remains, specifically from this time period, historical, from the historical time periods of the Bible. Now, we have to remember, too, that archaeology is a relatively recent discipline.

It only got started in kind of a speculative stage in the 1700s and really developed more in the mid 1800s. In these days, it is very different from what it is practiced today. It was essentially glorified treasure hunting.

So, there was a lot of excitement in the Western world with the decipherment of hieroglyphs. Just after that, a few decades later, the decipherment of cuneiform

script unlocked the language of Akkadian and others. During this phase, you would have wealthy patrons who would pay for excavations to go and essentially loot the treasures of the ancient world and bring them back to their museums or their mansions.

And when objects are removed from their physical setting, we lose so much data. So, we've inherited this treasure-hunting legacy even today as the antiquities market booms. And when we look at political instability in certain regions of the biblical lands, there's been an uptick in the antiquities trade.

So, we inherited this kind of treasure-hunting legacy. We also see this treasure-hunting legacy in a bit different in many faith contexts, where instead of the treasure of Tutankhamen's gold, the treasure is some kind of way to prove the Bible, that we find some nugget that's going to say see, the Bible is true. And the multitudes will stream into faith.

We'll talk about that in a moment here, but I don't think that's the best approach to archaeology. So, we want to be on our guard to treasure hunting modes in today's archaeology. So that's a brief description of what archaeology is.

So now here, we're talking about the Bible archaeology and the Bible or the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. We've talked a little bit about what archaeology is. So, let's now ask the question, what is the Bible? What is the Bible? Well, first of all, we speak of it as a book, but in fact, it's a collection of ancient writings that are preserved in much later forms.

So, for those of us who work in the ancient world, there's a lot of discussion and debate about the dating of certain traditions and certain texts, but many of us who work in the ancient world; it's very hard to read the Bible and not see the ancient world everywhere. In fact, the more I'm immersed in the ancient world, the more I am convinced that the Bible is very much at home within that world. But the Bible, of course, is much more than a collection of ancient documents.

For those of us in faith communities, we affirm that this is canon. This is inspired. This is God's word.

This is unique. This is a book or a collection of books like no other. But we also affirm that even though God is in and through this process, it is very much a human composition.

It's God working in and through humans in their particular contexts. So, the more that we understand their world and their context, the more clearly we can understand the message of the Bible. We have to acknowledge that the composition and formation of the Bible are complicated processes.

I'm sure it's because humans are involved, but it takes place over a long period of time. We have additions, we have edits, we have updates. This is not something that should be threatening to those of us in faith communities, but rather, these are illustrations of the contextual nature of who God is.

He's working in and through peoples in their worlds. This Bible is a dynamic document as it continues within these communities of faith in the ancient world and today. Now, the biggest thing we need to remember when we're talking about the Bible as it applies archaeology or applies to archaeology is that ultimately, the Bible is not intended to be some history book or science manual or anything of the sort, but rather it is ultimately about God and his people.

It is a description of who God is, describes his character, describes his relationship with his people, and that is the primary storyline. And this is difficult for us in Western, so-called modern contexts in that we often think that story informs history. The end goal is some kind of historical reconstruction.

Well, in the ancient world, historical facts, as we might call them, work the other way around. They inform the story rather than the story informing the history. So we need to keep that in mind as we go to the Bible.

And I think one great example of this is if we speak of the Omrides in the ninth century BC. We know a lot about the Omrides, relatively speaking. The most powerful dynasty of the northern kingdom, to a great extent dominating Judah to their south, intermarriage alliances with the Phoenician coast.

We have great military might and great building activities. The Omrides were a force to be reckoned with, so much so that Ahab was a member of a coalition that held off the Neo-Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III, in a very famous battle, historically speaking, the Battle of Qarqar, 853 BC.

And Ahab put up the strongest chariot corps. And the chariots are like the tanks of the ancient Near East. This is a formidable military endeavor.

And the coalition is successful for a time at holding off the great onslaught of Assyria. And you remember this battle, right? In the Bible, do you remember it? No, that's a trick question. It's not in there.

So, this illustrates the point that may have been one of the greatest military victories of historical King Ahab, but this is not of interest to the Bible. The Bible is far more concerned with allegiance or lack thereof to Yahweh. So, this is one illustration we might keep in mind that the Bible is first and foremost about God and his people.

So now we've talked about what archeology is. We've talked about what the Bible is. How do these fit together, or do they fit together? So, we're going to now ask the question, what is biblical archeology? And we have to acknowledge that we have some baggage with this question.

The baggage of archeology, A-R-K, and apologetics, not in the general sense of the word, but in the specific sense of the word where people will attempt to use archeology to prove the Bible right. So, you see an image here that I was sent or found on the internet. I get these sorts of things often when people find that I work in archeology.

And here it is. This is proof of the biblical Nephilim, these giants of old that are described in the early chapters of Genesis, where we have cohabitation of divine and human beings. And so, look, there's been a burial that's been uncovered, and they're giants, just like the Bible says, and it proves that the Bible is right.

And there's a major conspiracy trying to cover it up by people who work in professional archeology. Well, let me just say there's no such conspiracy. I work in these fields.

I attend these conferences and these conferences, these societies, they don't work in a way to keep out the truth. It's actually quite the opposite. This is the principle of accountability where folks who have training in order to evaluate particular claims and claims are brought before these individuals, and we as a community work out the validity of these claims.

Believe me, if there were giant burials, archeologists, regardless of their faith or creed, would be all over it and excited to excavate these giant burials. But still, this retains a very popular following on the internet and in pop culture. And you've heard the story, don't believe the experts. They're trying to take away the validity of the Bible or something like that.

Noah's Ark has been found I don't know how many times. There's one adventure that is apparently found, not only Noah's Ark, but the Ark of the Covenant, as well as identified Sodom and Gomorrah and the location of the Red Sea crossing. That is quite a career.

So again, if any of these things are discovered, chariot wheels at the bottom of the Red Sea, bring them before those who are trained to evaluate these claims. There isn't some conspiracy, but rather, these are folks who, well-intentioned or not, are trying to help God out. So, I don't know about you, but I don't think God needs any help, especially when it involves dishonesty.

So, what then, if that's not biblical archeology, what then is biblical archeology? Well, it's archeology that's biblical in its interest. That means we have a particular chronological focus and also a particular geographic focus. So, our chronological focus is sometime in the Late Bronze Age.

So, this would be from the 15th and 14th centuries. Some would start it more around the 12th century, this transition between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age I. And then it would go, if we include New Testament archeology, it would go into the first or second century of our common era. So, we have a chronological framework that hems in the main part of the story of the Bible that can be accessible via archeology.

So that would be when we have the people of Israel on the world stage. We also have a geographical focus, and that would be the ancient Levant or Southern Levant. That is the regions today of modern Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

We could continue to expand that again for New Testament times throughout the Mediterranean. So, we have a particular chronological and a particular geographical focus that defines biblical archeology. The use of the Bible in biblical archeology is, guess what, somewhat debated.

I say to my students all the time if it has anything to do with the Bible, it's debatable. And you throw archeology in the mix, and it's all the more the case. So, we have quite a range of opinions on how the Bible can and should be used.

Some would suggest that the Bible contains a lot of historical information. Others would suggest that the Bible has minimal historical information. So, this has been somewhat caricatured in the debates of the 1990s.

Most people don't use these terms in the same way anymore, but to speak of maximalists and minimalists. Maximalists would be those who would suggest that the Bible contains a lot of historical information. They still allow for nuance, particularly in genre and other things, but we have a lot of historical information in the Bible.

So, say the maximalists. The minimalists, on the other hand, would suggest that no, really, the Bible is the product in its most extreme form of the Hellenistic period. That is the period following Alexander the Great.

So, we're talking here the fourth century and even into the third and second centuries, when we have later in the second century, a revival of Jewish nationalism under the Maccabees, the Hasmonean dynasty. And then they are recreating their past. And so, we have a composition in the Hellenistic period that's imagining the past to create some sort of national charter.

That would be in its most extreme form. So, when we're dealing with periods before the Hellenistic period, which is the vast majority of the Old Testament, we would find very little information of historical value. As I said, that reflects the kind of dichotomy of a couple of decades ago.

Now more people recognize there's a tension between these poles and try to live in that tension and be critical in both our examination of texts, but also in our examination of archaeology. So, we'll talk about that in a moment, but neither text nor archaeology speak for themselves. I had a former teacher who used to joke that you don't dig a pot out of the ground, and it doesn't start speaking to you, telling you what it is, and telling you its history.

So, we want to seek a responsible integration of a variety of data sets. So, we want to look at the texts very carefully. We want to look at the archaeological material very carefully.

We want to bring in as many lenses to the texts and the archaeology as possible and critically examine them. Now, I use the word critical in the sense of being careful and objective, not in terms of a critical spirit, saying there's something wrong and bad with the text or there's something wrong and bad with the archaeology. Rather, we want to carefully engage these different data sets with all of the tools that we have available to us.

So, what happens? What are the results of this integration? If we take the Bible and we take the archaeology and we've now defined what biblical archaeology is, archaeology with chronological and geographical limits, now what happens when we put these together? What are the results? Well, here are the results. A quote I'll put up here from John Currid in the ESV Atlas. As for the bearing of archaeological study on the historical reliability of the Bible, what has been the result of many decades of archaeological investigation? The answer is simple.

Archaeology has time and again supported and confirmed the biblical record. So there you go. But here's a second quote written at the same time by Bill Deaver.

Today, archaeology far from confirming the historical basis for these themes, those are the major biblical movements, has undermined nearly all of the events. What? Are they digging in different holes? What's going on here? Well, we now recognize that, first of all, archaeological evidence is partial. Secondly, it needs interpretation.

So, I don't know that many of us, even those of us who work within archaeology, have considered how much is lost. So, this, for someone who works with animal bones, is very clear. You start with a living animal that is then slaughtered for consumption.

Well, in the slaughtering of the animal, the next process is then butchering. So now we may have separation from certain carcass parts, from meaty carcass parts. Then it's prepared and we have a further separation.

And at each separation, we have a deposition. So we may have the animal killed in one place, we may have it butchered in another, and then we may have further processing in a completely different location, each of those that would have left archaeological residues. Now, after that, it is cooked.

Most meats were stewed in a pot using a method of hacking up the bones with machetes or axes. So, you get all of the marrow and fat, cook it in a pot, and then consume it. Then you spit out the little bits of bone, and then it goes into a trash heap, a midden. Maybe it's the same one from the butchery refuse. Maybe it's a completely different deposition.

And then here come the years of time. We have decomposition, and we have different soil types that preserve different bones in different ways. And then you have archaeological biases, where to dig, how much to dig.

Most tells, we'll talk about tells later, are artificial mounds that represent civilization upon civilization usually only very small segments of the tells are excavated. And then when you're excavating, you have bias in what's collected. Most material, archaeologically speaking, in the lands of the Bibles, are picked by hand.

We do have many that will involve screening or sieving, sometimes dry, sometimes wet. And now we're using flotation. We're also looking at the microscopic level of certain samples.

But this is all, each time we are going down, it's getting less and less and less and less and less. So, archaeology is this endeavor that says a lot from a little, says a lot from a little. Anson Rainey used to say, archaeology is the, I think he used the word science of digging a square hole and spinning a yarn.

Of course, that's cynical. But what he's getting at is that there is much imagination involved in reconstructing from very little data. I think the rise of the employment of the hard sciences in this practice can sometimes even build false confidence because we can bring new definitions and accuracy to our description of very small units of remains.

But still, we need to remember how much is lost. So, we are extrapolating at best. We're taking data and considering it on a trajectory. But it's not shooting in the dark in that we're doing it in a larger context.



And that's why I mentioned in the previous slide, we want to engage a variety of data sets. So the more lenses we can bring to the question, the better in understanding what was going on in the past. So partial and complex data that we are dealing with.

And then there is the big one, interpretation. We all come to any interpretive task with our own biases, particularly as it pertains to history and the Bible. So, we have biases that we've inherited within our culture.

We have those that we've inherited within our particular faith traditions. And one of the beauties of the so-called postmodern movement, and this has come over in many ways to archaeology and what's known as post-processualism, that we are all coming with a limited degree of objectivity. Some would say no objectivity whatsoever.

So, we need to remember, we as interpreters come with our own interpretive baggage and biases. So, limited and complex data that needs to be interpreted, and you can get very different opinions about what archaeology does and doesn't do. So, how are we going to go forward? Is that the end of the lecture series? Can we kind of throw our hands up? Hardly.

So, let's talk about the Bible and the trowel and the question of how archaeology and the Bible relate. Well, I like to think of it in terms of three C's. And some others have also used similar kinds of methods of applying different sets of C's.

But I think of the first C as one of a complementary relationship, that archaeology can complement what we think we understand from the Bible. So, a great example of this that we'll talk about in a coming lecture is the Merneptah Stele. It dates to 1229 or 1209 BC, a victory hymn of a Pharaoh, the son of Ramses the Great, who campaigned into the Southern Levant, into Palestine.

And he claims to have conquered certain peoples and cities. And one of those peoples that he mentions that he conquered is none other than Israel. Now, with the biblical timeline, this is just at the very beginning of the story of Israel as a nation.

So, in the biblical storyline, this is just after they've come up out of Egypt. They're settled in the land, but they are certainly not a So this is an amazing complement to the biblical storyline as far as rooting it in time and space. There has been some debate because it is archaeology and the Bible, of course.

But by and large, the vast majority of scholars consider this to be a genuine correlation of the material remains, a record of a people named Israel in the right place at the right time with the biblical storyline. Now, how people make sense of that, of course, is very different. What is Israel? Is Israel of the 1200s the same as

Israel of the 9th and 8th century? The next mention we have of Israel is in the 9th century BC.

So, we have quite a gap, what happened in between. But these are the kinds of finds that can complement our reading of the Bible in a general sense. Now we also have some complements in a very particular and specific way.

Here's a discovery that was quite exciting in recent years. These are bullae. A bulla is a lump of clay placed on a letter, a papyrus document, to seal the string that would encircle the document.

You can see from the image that there are names impressed in the clay that would have been etched backwards into the seal that went into the clay before it hardened. Here we have the names of individuals: Huckel, son of Shomaiah, and Gedaliah, son of Pashur. Big deal? Yes, it's a very big deal if you've been reading your Jeremiah.

So, in Jeremiah 37 and 38, we have a group of officials, four officials who come to Zedekiah and petition against this anti-nationalist Jeremiah, who's expressing some pro-Babylonian sentiments. He's saying, you know, the city is doomed, surrender to the Babylonians. And these guys try to get Jeremiah in trouble.

They're successful to a certain extent in that they get him thrown in a cistern. Well, two of these individuals are none other than Huckel, son of Shomaiah, and Gedaliah, son of Pashur. So, we have the signatures, essentially, of individuals. To say it more dramatically, the hand that likely held the seal that pushed into this clay probably shook the hand of none other than biblical Jeremiah.

So that's pretty exciting. What a compliment. So, we have general compliments.

We also have specific compliments. So that's one-way archaeology, and the Bible can relate. Another is in the realm of clarity.

So, we can have a clarifying relationship of the Bible, sorry, archaeology to the Bible, in that something we dig up helps us better understand something that was a little fuzzy in the Bible, in our understanding. So, these can be historical, they can be cultural, they can be something that pertains to the practice of ancient Israelites. So, here's one of my favorites.

Isn't that amazing? Can you believe they found this? Wondering what it is, most likely. Well, this is a liver model, a clay liver model. And we found several of these throughout the ancient world, some even in bronze.

They are models of sheep livers, with little holes on them and a grid. And these are thought, we have some inscriptions on some of them.

These are thought to be models, liver models, to train diviners in how to engage in the practice of ecstasy, which is to look at the innards of a sacrificial animal in order to divine the future, to figure out what's going to happen. This is very popular in Mesopotamia, in particular. We have instructions on what they are to look for, abnormalities in the shape of the liver, particularly the lobe of the liver, and certain, seeing these as omens of things to come.

So, what's the big deal? Well, we have mention of this practice in Ezekiel chapter 21, where it speaks of Babylonians using livers and divination, but it also helps explain a peculiar prohibition in Pentateuchal texts. We have nine times in Leviticus and two times in Exodus in the sacrificial instructions, particular instructions to burn the lobe of the liver as part of the offal that is burned and consumed before the Lord. So, seemingly, this is to prevent any kind of abuse of looking at the liver to try to figure out the future because in the biblical view of things, the future belongs to Yahweh alone.

Divination is forbidden in many texts within the Old Testament. So, archaeology has provided some clarity for us with this practice of divination from the liver. So, most times when people talk, particularly those of us within faith contexts, of the relationship between the Bible and archaeology, we stop at these first two C's.

But there's a third C, and that would be the C of complication. That's when we dig something up in the ground, or we don't dig something up in the ground, that we would like to, and seemingly what we find or what we don't find conflicts with our understanding of the Bible. So, a classic case is this is a shot from the site of Jericho, around which there's much debate, and the verdict still remains. There are ongoing excavations, but when it was first kind of made famous in the excavations of John Garstang in the 1930s, it was all over the papers, Joshua's Walls Found.

And then, a couple of decades later, Dame Kathleen Kenyon came and said, uh-uh, you got the wrong time frame, and in fact, these walls were long before any particular time of Joshua, and there's nothing there. And then you have some archaeologists, Bryant Wood in the 1990s, engaged, revived the debate based on a particular pottery style that was present that Kenyon overlooked. But then radiocarbon dating pushed it back to what Kenyon had had, and the debate continues.

Today, some will call this the greatest disappointment in biblical archaeology, where it looked like it fit, and then it was pulled apart from that. There are ongoing excavations right now by a joint Italian and Palestinian team, so maybe we will have more clarity in the future. But the facts remain that certain events from the Bible lack the sort of archaeological confirmation that we would like.

And some of them are big, like the Exodus. We'll talk about it coming. But there isn't any unambiguous evidence that the Exodus ever happened.

Now, I'll talk about that in coming, but then I'll hold back on what I'm going to say about it. But we have to reckon with the complication that is created by things found or not found that some of us would like to bury back in the ground, or maybe get on Photoshop and create that chariot wheel at the bottom of the Red Sea. But I think each of these seas refines and enriches our understanding of the Bible.

So, the first two are quite obvious, and we celebrate those. They demonstrate time and again the way that the Bible is very much at home within the ancient world. But even that third sea, I think we can celebrate.

I've gone from this third sea of complication, keeping me up at night, wondering how I can make this work, and then being humbled to remember this isn't my Bible; these aren't my remains. And for those of us who put our faith and trust in God and his sovereignty, it's okay. We are human, after all.

Some complication is a good thing to remind us of who we are. We don't need to invent evidence. In fact, when we do that, we end up embarrassing the faith that we proclaim.

I've had many conversations with folks who know of my faith commitments and will point out some of these complications, and I would say, yes, you're right. Let's talk about it. So, you have wonderful avenues and opportunities to engage in discussions about complications, and even those can lead to further conversations about why then I would proclaim my faith in Jesus that I do if it's not all proven and figured out.

So, these can be, I think honesty, regardless, is always the best way forward. And so to embrace and even be humbled by this third C is a good thing. So, as we go forward here, we will take a look at some of the history and culture of ancient Israel during the different major time frames after talking about specific methods of archaeology, and how we do archaeology, and we will engage these three C's in the process.

So, stay tuned, and I hope you'll check in for the next one.

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