

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Genesis, Lecture 19: Archaeology and the Patriarchal Period

Author: Dr. Robert Vannoy

Session: Lecture 19

Source: Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Archaeology, Ezion-geber, Nelson Glueck, John Bright, T.L. Thompson, J. Van Seters, Nuzi texts, Mari texts, Ebla texts, Patriarchal Period

Abstract

Dr. Robert Vannoy discusses the role of archaeology in evaluating the historical reliability of the Old Testament, illustrating both its fragmentary nature and the tentative interpretation of archaeological findings through examples such as Solomon's copper mines at Ezion-geber and site identification at Tell Heshbon. He traces the shift from early 20th-century skepticism about the historicity of the patriarchs to a more positive view supported by the discovery of thousands of second-millennium B.C. Near Eastern texts. Despite a recent return to skepticism by scholars like Thompson and Van Seters, Vannoy argues that archaeological discoveries from Nuzi, Mari, and Ebla provide indirect corroboration by demonstrating that patriarchal names and customs closely match the historical context of their represented era.

Outline

I. Archaeology and Biblical History

- A. Fragmentary character of archaeological findings
- B. Tentative nature of interpreting archaeological data
 - 1. Case Study: Solomon's copper mines and Ezion-geber (1 Kings 9:26)
 - a. Nelson Glueck's initial theory of a blast furnace/refinery ("Pittsburgh of old Palestine")
 - b. Glueck's later modification of the theory: holes in walls were for wooden beams, not air vents
 - c. Beno Rothenberg's excavations in Timnah: mining restricted to 14th–12th centuries B.C. (Mosaic era, not Solomonic)
 - d. J. Bimson's reassessment: radiocarbon dates still strongly contend for Solomonic activity
 - 2. Caution against premature conclusions due to human error and subjectivity
- C. Value and limitations of archaeological illumination of Scripture
 - 1. Enormous value for understanding cultural background of the Old Testament

2. Importance of keeping incompleteness and tentative findings in mind

D. Recommendations for Biblical Archaeology Journals

1. Biblical Archaeology Review (popular format, color pictures, rich source of Near East info)
2. Bible Review (discussion of biblical interpretation and history, liberal theological slant)
3. The Biblical Archaeologist (long-standing standard, more technical, recently revamped style)

E. Archaeological Site Identification Issues

1. Problem of identifying mounds (tells) with historical places
2. Case of Ai: archaeological claims that it was unoccupied during Joshua's time
 - a. Likely case of mistaken site identification
 - b. Proposed conquest of Bethel instead
3. Case of Tell Heshbon (Numbers 21-30)
 - a. Lack of Late Bronze Age archaeological evidence poses dilemma for face-value conquest dating
 - b. Literary critical analysis (late editorial strain) matches archaeological skepticism
4. Subjectivity in academic research
 - a. Both literary criticism and archaeology involve subjective, judgmental decisions at every step
 - b. Different teams or directors can reach different conclusions on the same hill
 - c. Preconceptions organize how evidence is interpreted

II. The Patriarchal Period (Genesis 11:27 - Genesis 50)

A. Genesis 11:27 Division

1. The "generations of Terah" (toledot formula used ten times in Genesis)
2. Transition from universal history of mankind (Adam, Noah) to a particular family (Abraham) chosen by God

B. Authenticity and Historicity of the Patriarchal Accounts

1. Early 20th-century skepticism (Julius Wellhausen)
 - a. Patriarchs viewed as legendary or tribal personifications, not historical individuals
 - b. Narrative seen as a "glorified mirage" reflecting the exile period, not patriarchal times
2. Mid-century shift toward confidence in historicity (John Bright and William F. Albright)
 - a. Bright's A History of Israel asserts patriarchal narratives are firmly based in history
 - b. Confident belief in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as actual historical individuals, though biographical reconstruction is limited
3. Recent "Minimalist" challenges returning to Wellhausen's skepticism

- a. T.L. Thompson's *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (1974): argues Bright's evidence is circumstantial, asserts "the Bible does not mention a historical Abraham"
- b. J. Van Seters' *Abraham in History and Tradition* (1975): challenges historicity of Abraham
- c. Scholarly responses: J.A. Emerton (Oxford/Cambridge) notes Thompson raised important challenges to easily accepted views; evangelical interaction in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Miller and Wiseman)

C. Archaeological Reversal: Second Millennium B.C. Textual Discoveries

1. Nuzi and Mari Texts (18th century B.C.)
 - a. Mari: located on the Euphrates River; 20,000 tablets from the palace of Zimri-Lim
 - b. Mentions of the city of Nahor (home of Rebekah)
 - c. Divination techniques (examining animal livers)
2. Cappadocian Texts (19th century B.C.)
 - a. Assyrian merchants trading in Asia Minor
3. Nuzi Texts (15th century B.C.)
 - a. Hurrian population's customs (slave adoption, marriage, inheritance) match patriarchal narratives
4. Ras Shamra (Ugarit) Texts (15th - 14th centuries B.C.)
 - a. Written in cuneiform but represent a Semitic alphabetic language closely related to Biblical Hebrew
 - b. Throws light on grammar and vocabulary of Hebrew
5. Execration Texts from Egypt (20th - 19th centuries B.C.)
 - a. Inscribed curses on bowls or figurines revealing Egyptian influence in Canaan
6. Ebla Texts (24th century B.C.)
 - a. Discovered at Tel Mardikh, Syria in 1975 (17,000 cuneiform tablets from palace destroyed c. 2250 B.C.)
 - b. Reveal previously unknown empire
 - c. Mention names like Sodom, Gomorrah, Eber, and Abraham (as a personal name)
 - d. Political sensitivity: Syrian government constraints on publishing biblical connections

D. Synthesis: Names and Customs as Indirect Corroboration

1. Correspondence between patriarchal customs and second-millennium B.C. texts
2. Authenticity of Patriarchal Names
 - a. Names like Jacob, Abram, Nahor, Terah, Zebulun, Gad, Dan, Ishmael, Levi, Asher, and Issachar occur in Mari, Execration, and Ebla texts
 - b. These names represent an early Middle Bronze Age type and are not characteristic of later Israelite nomenclature (e.g., in the Exile)

c. Very few of these patriarchal names ever appear as proper names in Israel again during the biblical period, reinforcing their authenticity