

Chapter #6

The Historical Reliability of the New Testament, Part 2

In our last chapter we began to look at the Bible itself to see if it was internally consistent and if information was in harmony with what we already know of first-century Palestine. In this chapter we continue by looking at mostly external evidence for the historicity of the New Testament: archaeological evidence that substantiates places and events recorded in the Bible.

You should note, though, that archaeologists have barely skimmed the surface of excavating the Holy Land. After the destruction of most ancient cities, new cities were later built on top. Over thousands of years multiple layers of cities were built that today make it impossible to find the earlier remains — impossible because to do so would necessitate removing the current structures in the way. Writing about this phenomenon in 1979, one archaeologist noted that there were 6,000 sites surveyed, but only 1,200 excavated, and only 28 to a major extent. “Yet, of the estimated half a million documents from OT times — mostly those on clay and sherds from outside Palestine — fewer than ten percent have as yet been published.”¹ We have only discovered the tip of the iceberg. But to date, no piece of archaeological evidence has ever contradicted the Bible.

What are the most important New Testament archaeological discoveries?

1. The Pilate Inscription

Prior to 1961, there were no historical references outside the Bible to Pontius Pilate. Critics, of course, assumed the biblical account of Pilate to be fictional, until two Italian archaeologists discovered a 2-foot by 3-foot inscription in Caesarea in 1961 which stated: “Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea, has presented the Tiberium to the Caesareans.”

Luke 3:1 *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—*

2. The Crown of Thorns

John 19:2-3 *The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they struck him in the face*

The pictures we usually see are of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns with the thorns facing inward and blood trickling down his face. We think of it as another act of cruelty along with humiliation. But coins discovered from this period show that many eastern rulers actually wore crowns of thorns, but with the spikes projecting outward to depict the rays of the sun. If Jesus’s crown had been made from the date-palm leaf, with its long, sharp spikes, it was indeed a sign of derision and mockery, but not torture as we usually assume.

3. The Pavement

John 19:13 *When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha).*

For centuries there was no record of this court where Jesus was tried. Famed archaeologist William Albright believes it was the court of the Tower of Antonia, the Roman military headquarters in Jerusalem.²

Another area paved with large stones is near the temple area and has gaming boards carved into some of the stones that could be where the soldiers mocked Jesus by playing a game known as the *ōgame of the king.ō*³

4. The Ossuary of Johanan

Prior to 70 A.D., it was bones were often taken from the tomb and placed in an ossuary, or bone box. In 1968, an ossuary dated between A.D. 6 and 66 was found in northeastern Jerusalem that gave us the first physical evidence of crucifixion. The box contained the heel bones of Johanan that still had a 4½ inch iron nail through them. This was the first confirmation ever of the use of nails in the ankles during crucifixion. The bones also confirmed the use of nails through the forearms (the wrist was considered a part of the hand, but the word John uses for hand can also be translated arm). Johanan's leg bones had also been shattered with a forcible blow, just as is described of those who were crucified beside Jesus.⁴

John 19:31-32 *Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other.*

John 20:27 *Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

5. The Imperial Decree

In 1878 a marble slab was found in Nazareth containing an imperial decree warning against damaging tombs, exhuming the dead, etc. The document was published in 1930 and reads as follows:

*ōOrdinance of Caesar. It is my pleasure that graves and tombs remain perpetually undisturbed for those who have made them for the cult of their ancestors or children or members of their house. If, however, anyone charges that another has either demolished them, or has in any other way extracted the buried, or has maliciously transferred them to other places in order to wrong them, or has displaced the sealing on other stones, against such a one I order that a trial be instituted, as in respect of the gods, so in regard to the cult of mortals. For it shall be much more obligatory to honor the buried. Let it be absolutely forbidden for anyone to disturb them. In case of violation I desire that the offender be sentenced to capital punishment on charge of violation of sepulchre.ō*⁵

The fascinating feature of this decree is that it is dated before A.D. 50, which would place it during the reign of Claudius, who reigned A.D. 41-54. In A.D. 49, Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome because of a disturbance caused by *ōChrestusō* (noted in Acts 18:2; Christianity was considered a part of Judaism at this point in history). Could it be that Claudius had heard reports of a missing body in Jerusalem and posted this decree in Jesus's hometown as a warning to His followers?

Matthew 28:12-13 *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'*

6. The Pools at Bethesda

John 5:2 *Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.*

Here is one more prime example of an instance where the Bible was perceived as unreliable. No such structure had ever been found in or around Jerusalem, making John's account suspect. But in 1888, while clearing away some ruins at St. Anne's Church in Jerusalem, excavators discovered a fresco representing the story of Jesus healing the invalid at this pool. Below the fresco was a flight of stairs leading to two pools surrounded by a portico. Presumably, there would have been a colonnade on each of the four sides and another between the pools, for a total of five, just as John recorded. One of the Qumran documents refers to twin pools near the temple area and both Eusebius and the Bordeaux pilgrim (both in the fourth century) speak of twin pools at Bethesda.⁶

7. The Pavement of Erastus

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth. At the end of his letter he mentions greetings from other inhabitants of Corinth:

Romans 16:23 *Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings.*

No such record of Erastus existed until an inscription was found in a pavement in Corinth in 1929 which read: "Erastus, curator of public buildings, laid this pavement at his own expense." The pavement has been dated to the first century, making it probable that the Erastus spoken of by Paul and the Erastus mentioned in the inscription are one and the same.

8. The Purple-Dyers of Thyatira

Acts 16:14 *One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.*

A text found in 1872 read, "The city honored from among the purple-dyers, an outstanding citizen, Antiochus the son of Lykus, a native of Thyatira, as a benefactor," thus providing corroborating evidence for the accuracy of Luke's description.

9. The Judgment Seat

Acts 18:12 *While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court.*

Excavations at Corinth have unearthed the *bema* or judgment seat before which Paul was tried (the word "court" in the NIV is actually the Greek word *bema*, judgment seat). Gallio was the brother of Seneca, a philosopher who also tutored Nero. "Fragments of a stone inscription of Claudius found at Delphi refer to Gallio as the Proconsul of Achaia." Not surprisingly, this inscription is dated to A.D. 52, fixing the time of Paul's stay in Corinth. Again, Luke proves to be accurate in his record of details.

What about the Old Testament?

To this point we've done very little discussion of the Old Testament, primarily because of our purpose in breaking down barriers to belief in Jesus Christ as He is portrayed in the New Testament. But that doesn't mean we can completely ignore the Old Testament. The Old Testament is an integral part of the New Testament. In fact, the religion practiced by Jesus and His disciples was the religion established in the Old Testament, which, like the New, is founded on historical information.

The textual evidence for the Old Testament is incredibly strong, but in a different way than the New Testament. The Old Testament scribes were highly trained, and they used exacting methods to insure accuracy. Since old manuscripts could fade or decay, thereby making them more difficult to read and subject to error, the copy was always considered to be more reliable than the original.

"The same extreme care which was devoted to the transcription of manuscripts is also at the bottom of the disappearance of the earlier copies. When a manuscript had been copied with the exactitude prescribed by the Talmud, and had been duly verified, it was accepted as authentic and regarded as being of equal value with any other copy. If all were equally correct, age gave no advantage to a manuscript; on the contrary, age was a positive disadvantage, since a manuscript was liable to become defaced or damaged in the lapse of time. A damaged or imperfect copy was at once condemned as unfit for use."

After new copies were made of Old Testament books, the originals were placed in a *genitzah* (a wooden cupboard), usually located in an attic or cellar of a synagogue, until a time when they could be buried or burned. In 1896, 90,000 manuscripts were found in a *genitzah* in Cairo, a priceless find. The collection of liturgical, legal and literary documents included a fragment of the original Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus. The discovery of the

Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 helped scholars see the accuracy with which the scribes copied manuscripts. Prior to the discovery, the oldest copy of Isaiah was the Masoretic text of 900 A.D. But in Qumran a 24-foot long scroll of Isaiah was found that dated to 100 B.C. This manuscript, which was at least 1,000 years older than the Masoretic text, was virtually identical.

Of the 166 words in Isaiah 53, there are only seventeen letters in question. Ten of these letters are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the sense. Four more letters are minor stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. The remaining three letters comprise the word *light*, which is added in verse 11, and does not affect the meaning greatly. Furthermore, this word is supported by the LXX and IQ Is. Thus, in one chapter of 16 words, there is only one word (three letters) in question after a thousand years of transmission and this word does not significantly change the meaning of the passage.⁹

What are the most important Old Testament archaeological discoveries?

1. The Ebla Tablets

Ebla was the center of a powerful empire in northern Syria, but it was unheard of prior to 1974. Two professors from the University of Rome uncovered ruins from the ancient city dating back to 3400 B.C. Ebla was at the height of its power in 2300 and was destroyed in 2250 B.C. The site, Tell-Mardikh, provided 17,000 clay tablets dating back to 2300 B.C., all of which were written in an ancient Semitic language related to the Hebrew of the Old Testament. Although Ebla isn't mentioned in the Bible, the find had a tremendous impact on biblical criticism.

A. Biblical critics used to teach that Moses couldn't have written the first five books of the Bible because there was no written language prior to 1000 B.C. But now we know from the Ebla tablets that there was writing 1000 years before Moses. Critics also argued that the legislation and priestly code in the Pentateuch were too developed to have been written by Moses; the Israelites were just too primitive.¹⁰ But the Ebla tablets contain elaborate judicial proceedings and case law, many similar to those found in Deuteronomy, which critics contended was very late in origin.¹¹

B. Genesis 14, which mentions Abraham's victory over the Mesopotamian kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar, was considered unreliable. But the Ebla tablets refer to all five cities (in one case, in the exact same order). The tablets also speak of other places mentioned in the Old Testament: Nahor, Hazor, Megiddo, Jerusalem, Lachish, Dor, Gaza, Ashtarto, Schechem, Zarad, Canaan, etc.¹²

C. Many names of Ebla's residence are similar to those found in the book of Genesis, suggesting that these were common names during the time the Old Testament events were taking place.

2. The Walls of Jericho

Archaeology confirms the account of the falling of the walls of Jericho:

Joshua 6:20 When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city.

The discovery between 1930 and 1936 was so startling that a statement was signed by Garstang and two other members of the team: "As to the main fact, then, there remains no doubt: the walls fell outward so completely that the attackers would be able to clamber up and over their ruins into the city."¹³ When a city is attacked from the outside by an invading army, the walls fall inward, not outward. That is, with the exception of Jericho.

3. The Hittites

The Hittites, mentioned 20 times in the Old Testament, were once thought to be mythological because there was no archaeological evidence confirming their existence. But now, through archaeological excavations from 1906 through the 1940s, we know the Hittite empire stretched all the way from upper Mesopotamia almost to the Aegean Sea. Their capital cities, Carchemish and Boghas Koi, have been excavated; their language deciphered; their code of laws read and compared with other ancient codes; and their civilization has become well known.¹⁴

Joshua 1:4 *Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west.*

4. The Household of David

No inscription had ever been found (outside of the Bible) to confirm that David was the King of Israel in the 9th century B.C. Many critics relegated the accounts to folklore. In 1993 the first inscription to confirm the biblical record was found at Tel Dan in Galilee. A stone fragment found by archaeologists referred to a ðhouse of Davidð and identified David as the ðking of Israel.ð Another 9th century stone inscription created by a king of Moab also referred to the ðhouse of David.ð¹⁵

5. The Black Obelisk

A large black obelisk dating to 841-814 B.C. was discovered in Iraq in 1846. The writing on the obelisk described the conquests of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. Among the names listed as vassals to the Assyrian king was Jehu, King of Israel, the son of Omri. The obelisk actually contains a pictorial representation of Jehu bringing a tribute of silver, gold and fruits. The biblical record identifies Jehu, usurper of the throne, as a descendent of the wicked king Omri. He reigned over Israel from 842 to 815 B.C. ð exactly the period of the black obelisk.

6. The Prayer of Nabonidus

One apparent discrepancy in the book of Daniel cast doubt on the Old Testament for years. Daniel mentions that Belshazzar was king of Babylon just before the Medo-Persian conquest, but noted historians such as Herodotus said nothing of Belshazzar in the line of Babylonian kings. Instead, they claimed Nabonidus was the last ruler of Babylon. Of course, Daniel was assumed to be in error.

Daniel 5:1-2 *King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.*

Daniel 5:30 *That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain,*

Then excavations at the site of ancient Ur unearthed an inscription containing a prayer by Nabonidus for his firstborn son, Belshazzar. Other texts found revealed that Nabonidus entrusted his army and kingship to Belshazzar around 556 B.C., while Nabonidus campaigned in Arabia for 10 years. So Belshazzar was really a co-regent.¹⁶ This explains Daniel 5:29 ð ðThen at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.ð Belshazzar could only make Daniel third in the kingdom because he himself was only number two. The biblical record is in complete harmony with the historical facts we have today.

What do the experts say regarding the historicity of the Bible?

ðIt is therefore legitimate to say that, in respect of that part of the Old Testament against which the disintegrating criticism of the last half of the nineteenth century was chiefly directed, the evidence of archaeology has been to re-establish its authority, and likewise to augment its value by rendering it more intelligible through a fuller knowledge of its background and setting. Archaeology has not yet said its last word; but the results already achieved confirm what faith would suggest, that the Bible can do nothing but gain from an increase of knowledge.ð¹⁷

ðIt can truly be said that there isn't any place on the face of the earth where so much is known about so many ancient sites that are all mentioned in one collection of ancient documents ð the Bible. When you add to this the Bible's wealth of historical details about the people of the land, the reign of its kings, the battles fought there, and the empires that successively controlled the land, it becomes clear that the Bible isn't just some book of religious stories. It's detailed, accurate history.ð¹⁸

It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible.¹⁹

Of the hundreds of thousands of artifacts found by the archeologists, not one has ever been discovered that contradicts or denies one word, phrase, clause, or sentence of the Bible, but always confirms and verifies the facts of the biblical record.²⁰

Problems still exist, of course, in the complete harmonization of archaeological material with the Bible, but none so serious as not to bear real promise of imminent solution through further investigation. It must be extremely significant that, in view of the great mass of corroborative evidence regarding the biblical history of these periods, there exists today not one unquestionable find of archaeology that proves the bible to be in error at any point.²¹

So, what have we done so far in our study of the biblical texts? We've shown through the bibliographic test that the Bible we hold in our hands today is substantially the same as the original. Now, through internal and external evidence, we've shown that our "original" is historically accurate and reliable. There is no rationale for disbelieving the Bible. Now, the skeptic might not be ready to accept the theological assertions that accompany the historical events, but he cannot merely dismiss the Bible as fantasy or myth. Any intelligent person should consider the Bible, even if only for the immense amount of ancient historical information that cannot be found anywhere else. Any thinking person should at least consider its claims.

End Notes

¹ Donald Wiseman and Edwin Yamauchi, *Archaeology and the Bible: An Introductory Study*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 5.

² Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 73.

³ Steven Collins, *Championing the Faith: A Layman's Guide to Proving Christianity's Claims* (Teacher's Edition) (Tulsa: Virgil Hensley Publishing Co., 1991), p. 220.

⁴ Wiseman, p. 84.

⁵ Paul Maier in *First Easter* (p. 119), quoted by Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson in *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988, 1993), p. 115..

⁶ *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1980) vol. 1, p. 188.

⁷ Wiseman, p. 90.

⁸ Sir Frederic Kenyon, quoted in McDowell's *Evidence*, p. 54.

⁹ Norman Geisler, quoted by McDowell in *Evidence*, p. 58.

¹⁰ *Evidence*, p. 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹² Collins, p. 254.

¹³ Garstang, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 69.

¹⁴ J.A. Huffman, *Voices from Rocks and Dust Heaps of Bible Lands* (Butler, IN: The Higley Press, 1943), p. 34.

¹⁵ Grant R. Jeffries, *The Signature of God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), p. 78.

¹⁶ *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 183

¹⁷ Sir Frederic Kenyon, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 66.

¹⁸ Collins, p. 265.

¹⁹ Dr. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, quoted by Jeffries, p. 75.

²⁰ Jeffries, p. 75.

²¹ Henry M. Morris, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 70.