

# Archaeology and the Bible:

## Assaulting or Affirming the Truth of God's Word?

**ROCKS** and relics may seem irrelevant to some people, but they are part of a battle for the Bible brewing over what some would call the dustbin of history: archaeology. For centuries, archaeological discoveries consistently supported the biblical texts. Now, archaeologists with an ax to grind are digging to disprove the Bible. With the mainstream press giving credible coverage to the skeptics' assault, it's time for believers to become familiar with the political and ideological tactics behind these allegations and equip themselves with responses to these issues.

### An Assault on Scripture

Many historians and a growing number of theologians are joining the ranks of "biblical minimalists." They claim the Bible contains a minimal amount of reliable history. They contend that most of the Old Testament was written by a group of priests in the post-exilic period, centuries after the events allegedly happened. They suggest that it was part of an elaborate conspiracy to create a national identity for Israel by providing folklore that created national heroes such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and David.

With the presupposition that archaeology represents the only verifiable evidence, the logical stance is "prove it." Essentially, minimalists have rejected the biblical text and accepted only what can be proven by archaeology. The Bible has been judged guilty until proven innocent.

### Biblical Fabrications?

Minimalists often teach that the Hebrew Bible represents historical fiction, including legendary tales based on actual persons or events. Yet they conclude

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that these biblical heroes are no better than those of Greek mythology. The more cynical critics describe these accounts as pious lies.

Minimalists claim that whenever a text includes supernatural descriptions, it has crossed the line between history and mythology. However, they do not hold other historical texts to the same standard. They claim that the theological content of the Bible makes its historical content unreliable, even though other ancient inscriptions combine records of historical achievements with religious content.

Denying the supernatural elements of the Bible and discrediting its factual reliability humanizes the text, making it equal to any other text. This opens the door for pluralism, the belief that all religions have equal merit.

Atheists, pluralists, moral relativists, and those with an anti-supernatural bias have an ideological stake in disproving the Bible.

Another group has an even greater stake. After the Oslo accord of 1993 gave the Palestinians limited autonomy, they formed the Palestinian Department of Archaeology and set out to unearth their own evidence at sites like Jericho. Naturally, they have an interest in denying a historical Jewish presence in the land. Other Islamic countries, such as Syria, have denied archaeologists access to historical sites within their country, presumably because of similar anti-Semitic bias.

Some who deny the existence of David and Solomon, or suggest they were merely tribal lords, want to

## Does It Really Matter?

What difference does it make if we believe the Bible is truthful and accurate in all that it says? If the Bible contains errors in factual matters, it calls into question its reliability on doctrinal matters. For example, if someone lies to you once, you have reason to doubt everything else he tells you.

God does not lie (Titus 1:2). "And the words of the LORD are flawless" (Psalm 12:6). We can depend on the Bible to tell us the truth.

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deconstruct Israel's history to prove that Israel was never a nation at all.

### An Affirmation of Scriptural Truth

The battle for the Bible is really a clash of worldviews. The minimalist worldview rejects the supernatural, concluding that the Bible cannot possibly contain true accounts of history. The Judeo-Christian worldview accepts that divine intervention is the most important aspect of history worthy of being recorded.



Divine intervention is rarely verifiable. Perhaps that is why the biblical writers went to great lengths to record so much other historical detail that was verifiable.

The Bible does not need human verification to be true. Still archaeological discoveries continue to support the factual statements of the Bible. Thumb through the pages of a recently published Bible atlas or Bible dictionary for a glimpse of significant archaeological discoveries. Artifacts, buildings, inscriptions, and tombs continue to verify the people, places, and events of the Bible. To highlight a few, you might find:

- Royal palaces have been discovered at Samaria (1 and 2 Kings), Babylon (Daniel), and Susa (Esther).

### The Bible does not need human verification to be true.

- The Black Obelisk of Shalmanezzar III depicts Jehu, king of Israel, paying tribute and kneeling before the Assyrian king. This is the only known likeness of a king of Israel or Judah.
- Hezekiah's tunnel was created to tap the Gihon Spring for

a fresh water supply during Assyria's siege of Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 20:20).

- The Cyrus Cylinder records the liberation of Babylon, the return of displaced peoples to their homes, and restoration of the temples destroyed by the Babylonians (see Ezra 1:1-8).

The biblical writers clearly intended to make an accurate record of God's intervention in human history. Sacred history and secular history are intertwined in such a way that to deny one destroys the other.

### Moving Forward with the Past

It would be dishonest to claim that archaeology and the Bible have never conflicted. Time after time, however, apparent discrepancies have been resolved when new information became available. Kathleen Kenyon excavated Jericho and found astonishing evidence of fallen walls and a city burned to the ground but not plundered. She dated the destruction a couple of hundred years before Joshua would have been on the scene and concluded that the Hebrews created a legend to explain the destroyed city. However, subsequent research has shown that she misdated her findings and that the timeline fits perfectly with the conquest of Canaan.

## The Testimony of Scripture

*What does the Bible say about its own trustworthiness?*

1. What is God's standard for accuracy and what is the consequence for giving an inaccurate message? Read Deuteronomy 18:18-20.
2. Does Scripture affirm its own accuracy? Read John 10:35.
3. Is Scripture reliable in a general sense or in a more specific sense? Read Matthew 5:18, 19.
4. Where did Scripture come from? Read 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20, 21.
5. What did Jesus say about God's Word? Read John 17:17.
6. Can God's Word be trusted? Read Psalm 19:7.

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Any apparent discrepancies that arise must be met with the same wait-and-see approach. This does not mean we are denying evidence contrary to our belief system. It simply means we must reserve judgment until all the evidence is in.

Piecing information together through archaeology is like asking hundreds of people to work on a giant jigsaw puzzle without a picture to guide them. As they assemble the pieces, each worker forms preliminary conclusions about the image. Differences of opinion are inevitable and such discussions are a valuable part of the process. As more pieces fit together, they may need to revise their conclusions as the picture, or portion of the picture, becomes clearer.

We must be cautiously optimistic when new discoveries appear to support the Bible, and unshaken when they don't. Archaeology is not the basis of our faith. Our faith is in the God of the Bible, not in arguments that support the Bible.

## **The Word of God will stand the test.**

The role of archaeology is not corroboration but elaboration. Archaeology informs us about the "big picture" of history. It elaborates on the anthropological background so we can understand the cultural aspects of history. Archaeology does not define history, it describes history.

### **Truth on Our Side**

Sadly, the minimalist debate has eroded respect for the accuracy of the Bible, even in Christian circles. However, the majority of scholars continue to believe archaeological discoveries affirm the accuracy of the biblical accounts.

The battle lines have been drawn, but believers need not despair. Who has truth on their side: the one who stands by the recorded account of God's activity in human history or the one who tries to reconstruct a scenario of the past to accommodate a particular ideology?

What is true cannot be proven false. The Word of God, as the standard of truth, will stand the test. The shifting sands of archaeology are a poor foundation, but the Word of God is a solid rock. **▮**

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## **Additional Resources**

### **On Archaeology**

Associates for Biblical Research  
[www.ChristianAnswers.Net](http://www.ChristianAnswers.Net)

Their website offers a readable presentation of archaeological evidence that supports the Bible. They also publish a quarterly magazine, *Bible and Spade*.

Biblical Archaeology Society  
[www.bib-arch.org](http://www.bib-arch.org)

Their website contains valuable links to other relevant sources. They also publish *Biblical Archaeology Review*, a monthly magazine for scholarly discussion of the latest developments in archaeology.

### **On the Views of Critics**

Daniel Lazare, "False Testament—Archaeology Refutes the Bible's Claim to History," *Harper's*, March 2002, 39-47. Available at [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com).

### **On Christian Responses to Critics**

Paul L. Maier, "Archaeology—Biblical Ally or Adversary?," *Christian Research Journal*, 27-2 (2004), 12-21. Available from [www.equip.org/journal](http://www.equip.org/journal).

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