

IS THE BIBLE HISTORICALLY RELIABLE?

In 1947 a discovery was made that became the most important archaeological discovery of the twentieth century. The story begins in February or March of 1947, when a Bedouin shepherd named Muhammed was searching for a lost goat. He tossed a stone into a hole in a cliff on the west side of the Dead Sea, about eight miles south of Jericho. To his surprise he heard the sound of shattering pottery. Investigating, he discovered an amazing sight. On the floor of the cave were several large jars some of which contained leather scrolls, wrapped in linen cloth. Because the jars were carefully sealed, the scrolls had been preserved in excellent condition for nearly nineteen hundred years. They were evidently placed there before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The Value of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Until the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, which date from the third century BC to the first century AD, the oldest Old Testament manuscripts were a fragment of Deuteronomy 6:4 (Nash Papyrus), dated to the first century BC, a few biblical fragments from the Cairo Geniza (a synagogue storeroom), dating to the fifth century AD, and the Masoretic texts¹ from the ninth to the eleventh centuries AD

The oldest existing complete Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament, the Leningrad Codex (see p. 31), comes from the first decade of the eleventh century AD. The great importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls, therefore, lies in the fact that the earliest scrolls date back to only about two hundred years after the last book of the Old Testament was completed.

Thanks to the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now have a complete manuscript of the Hebrew text of the book of Isaiah and fragments of most of the other biblical books that are more than one thousand years older than the manuscripts previously known to exist.

The significance of this discovery has to do with the detailed closeness of the Isaiah scroll (c. 125 BC) to the Masoretic Text of Isaiah one thousand years later. It demonstrates the unusual accuracy of the copyists of the Scripture over a thousand-year period. When the Masoretic text was compared with the Qumran texts, they were found to be almost identical.

Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (AD 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations of spelling. Even those Dead Sea fragments of Deuteronomy and Samuel which point to a different manuscript family from that which underlies our received Hebrew text do not indicate any differences in doctrine or teaching. They do not affect the message of revelation in the slightest.²

Thus we can know that our present Old Testament text, based on the Masoretic text, is practically identical with the Hebrew text in use at the time of Jesus. There is, therefore, no reason to doubt that what the authors of the Old Testament wrote is substantially the same as what we have in our Bibles today.

The great importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls lies in the fact that they are more than one thousand years older than the oldest manuscript we had before 1948.

No other ancient writings comparable to the Old Testament have been transmitted so accurately, mainly because the Jewish scribes and the

Masoretes treated God's Word with the greatest imaginable reverence. They devised a complicated system of counting the verses, words, and letters of the text to safeguard against any scribal slips. Any scroll not measuring up to these rules was buried or burned.

The Transmission of the New Testament

All of the New Testament books were written during the second half of the first century: from Galatians and the two letters to the Thessalonians, around AD 50, to John's Gospel and the book of Revelation, ca. AD 90 -100.

As with the Old Testament, all of the New Testament autographs have been lost. However, because the New Testament books were the most frequently copied and widely circulated books in antiquity, we have today more than five thousand known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

No other book in antiquity even begins to approach such a large number of extant manuscripts. In comparison, “the *Iliad* by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The first complete preserved text of Homer dates from the 13th century.”³

For Caesar’s *Gallic War* (composed between 58 and 50 BC) there are several extant MSS, but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar’s day. Of the 142 books of the Roman history of Livy (59 BC - AD 17), only 35 survive; these are known to us from not more than twenty MSS of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Book II-VI, is as old as the fourth century.⁴

The Manuscripts of the New Testament – The earliest manuscript among the more than five thousand known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament is a small fragment of papyrus (called P52) from around AD 130, containing portions of John 18:31-33 and 37-38 (see p. 320).

The Chester Beatty papyri (named after their original owner) come from the second and third centuries and consist of papyri containing portions of all four Gospels and Acts, almost all of Paul’s epistles, the book of Hebrews and Revelation 9-17. From the same time period we have the Bodmer papyri (also named after their owner) that contain the Gospels of Luke and John, and the letters to Jude and 1 and 2 Peter. These papyri all come from Egypt, where the dry climate helped to preserve them.

The most complete New Testament manuscripts, written on vellum (parchment), come from the fourth century: (1) Codex Sinaiticus (ⲁ), discovered by Constantine von Tischendorf in St. Catherine’s Monastery (at the foot of Mount Sinai), comes from

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the middle of the fourth century and contains the entire Greek New Testament. (2) Codex Vaticanus (B), from the Vatican Library, is dated slightly earlier than Sinaiticus and contains the New Testament up to Hebrews 9:14. On textual grounds Codex Vaticanus is considered the most valuable of all existing New Testament manuscripts. Three other important manuscripts are Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Beza, and Codex Ephraemi from the fifth century.

In addition to the approximately thirty-two hundred manuscripts, which are continuous text manuscripts, we have another 2,200 lectionary manuscripts. Lectionaries are “manuscripts in which the text of the New Testament books is divided into separate pericopes [sections], arranged according to their sequence as lessons appointed for the church year.”⁵ While a few of these lectionaries go back to the fourth century, the majority were written after the eighth century.

New Testament Textual Criticism – We have seen that there is no body of literature in history that enjoys such a wealth of ancient manuscripts as the New Testament. Yet this very fact produces its own problems. The more manuscripts, the greater the textual variations created by scribal mistakes. If a scribe was listening to a dictation, he could make mistakes with words that sounded alike; if he was copying from a manuscript before him, he could mistake one word for another that looked like it. Or his eyes could jump from one word to another occurrence of the same word or to another word that had the same ending, and thus a portion of the text could be left out or written twice. Textual critics seek to reconstruct as closely as possible the original wording of the biblical text.

The English classical scholar Sir Frederic Kenyon stated: “It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God.”⁶ It should also be clearly stated that in spite of the many variant readings in the manuscripts, none of them affect any point of Christian faith and practice.

The Evidence from Archaeology

While archaeology cannot prove the spiritual truths of the Bible, it can illuminate and clarify the historical circumstances of numerous passages and thereby validate the historicity of many of the events recorded in Scripture. Among the most important discoveries of archaeology that support the historical reliability of Scripture are the following:

1. The Hammurabi Stele (ca. 1700 BC) was found by French archaeologists in the winter of 1901-1902 at Susa, the biblical Shushan (Dan 8:2), and is now exhibited in the Louvre in Paris. It contains about 280 laws, many of which are strikingly similar to the Mosaic laws:

Hammurabi #14

If a citizen kidnaps and sells a member of another citizen’s house-

hold into slavery, then the sentence is death.

Exodus 21:16

He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.

Hammurabi # 196 and 197

If a citizen blinds an eye of an official, then his eye is to be blinded. If one citizen breaks a bone of another, then his own bone is to be broken.

Exodus 21:24

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

The discovery of the Hammurabi Stele and other ancient law codes disposed of the old critical view that the laws of the Pentateuch could not have come from the time of Moses.

2. The Merneptah Stele (ca. 1200 BC) was found by Sir Flinders Petrie in the mortuary temple at Thebes and published in 1897. It is today exhibited in Cairo. The stele celebrates Pharaoh Merneptah's (1213-1203 BC) victory over rebellious forces in his Asiatic possessions. It contains the earliest reference to the people of Israel in the ancient world.

3. The Moabite Stone (ca. 850 BC) is exhibited in the Louvre. In 1868, an Arab Sheikh, at Diban, showed the German missionary, F. Klein, an inscribed slab that was 3 feet 10 inches high, 2 feet wide and 10 inches

thick. German and French officials showed interest in the stone. A French orientalist, Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, was able to obtain a squeeze, i.e., a fac-

“Archaeology can help verify certain historical events that have taken place in the past, but archaeology can only go so far in that archaeology can perhaps demonstrate the truth of some historical event, but it certainly cannot verify the truth of the miraculous. So we get to a point where we have to accept the message of the Bible on faith and we can't depend on archaeology for that” (Bryant Wood cited in Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* [Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997], 343).

simile impression, of the inscription. This was fortunate because the Arabs, realizing that they had something valuable, broke it into pieces. The fragments were then carried away to bless their grain. Not all the pieces have been recovered, but the inscription has been restored. It recounts the story of the Moabite king Mesha's rebellion against the king of Israel. It supplements the account of Israel's relations with Moab as recorded in 2 Kings 3.

Moabite Stone

Omri, ruler of Israel, invaded Moab year after year because Chemosh, the divine patron of Moab, was angry with his people. When the son of Omri succeeded him during my reign, he bragged: "I too will invade Moab." However, I defeated the son of Omri and drove Israel out of our land forever. Omri and his son ruled the Madaba plains for forty years.

2 Kings 3:4, 5

Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheep breeder, and he regularly paid the king of Israel one hundred thousand lambs and the wool of one hundred thousand rams. But it happened, when Ahab died, that the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.

4. The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (ca. 840 BC) was discovered in 1846 by A. H. Layard at Nimrud. It is exhibited in the British Museum. It shows the Israelite king Jehu paying tribute to the Assyrian king and provides extrabiblical evidence for the domination of Assyria over Israel as well as the existence of Jehu as king of Israel. "Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet" (1 Kings 19:16).

5. The Taylor Prism (ca. 690 BC) is in the British Museum. It was found at Nineveh and contains the military campaigns of Sennacherib (705-681 BC), king of Assyria. The best known passage describes Sennacherib's unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah, as recorded in 2 Kings 19 and Isaiah 36 and 37. The Assyrian account tacitly agrees with the biblical account by making no claim that Jerusalem was taken. The six-sided hexagonal clay prism says, "[Hezekiah] I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage." According to 2 Kings 19:35, 36 Sennacherib was unable to capture Jerusalem because "the angel of the LORD went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. . . . So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned *home*, and lived at Nineveh."

6. The Tel Dan Stele (9th or 8th century BC) is a black basalt stele erected by an Aramaean king in northernmost Israel, containing an Aramaic inscription to commemorate his victory over the ancient Israelites. Only portions of the inscription remain, but clearly legible is the phrase “house of David” (1 Sam 20:16). Joram son of Ahab (2 Kings 8:16) also appears in the inscription. This is the first time that the name “David” has been recognized at any archaeological site. Like the Moabite Stone, the Tel Dan Stele seems typical of a memorial intended as a sort of military propaganda, which boasts of Hazael’s or his son’s victories.

7. The Babylonian Chronicles (6th century BC) are clay tablets that present a concise account of major internal events in Babylonia. They describe the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC (Zeph 2:13, 15), the battle of Carchemish and the submission of Judah, in 605 BC (2 Kings 24:7; Dan 1:2), the capture of Jerusalem in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:10-17), and the fall of Babylon to the Persians in 539 BC (Isa 45:1; Dan 5:30). In connection with the fall of Babylon, the chronicles refer to Belshazzar (Dan 5:1), who was coregent with his father Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon.



The Tel Dan Stele

8. The Pontius Pilate Inscription (first century AD) was found in 1961 in the theatre of Caesarea Maritima, the city of Pilate’s residence in Palestine. Among the few lines still legible are the words “Pontius Pilate Prefect of Judea.” The inscription is the first archaeological evidence for Pilate, before whom Jesus was tried and condemned to death (Matt 27:11-26).

9. Politarch inscriptions – Critics of the New Testament claimed that Luke was mistaken in calling the chief magistrates in Thessalonica “politarchs” (Acts 17:6), a title not found in extant classical literature. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a number of inscriptions using this term have been found in Macedonian towns, including Thessalonica.

Apart from these major finds of which there are quite a few more, there have been many smaller finds, such as rings and seals, that have confirmed the historical reliability of Scripture. William F. Albright, probably the great-

est archaeologist of the twentieth century, whose theological position in the 1920s was one of “extreme radicalism,” came to appreciate the historical value of Scripture and wrote in 1956, “There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament tradition.”⁷ The same is true of the New Testament. Concerning Luke, the historian of the New Testament, F. F. Bruce wrote, “Our respect for Luke’s [historical] reliability continues to grow as our knowledge of this field increases.”⁸

The Evidence from Prophecy

The purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy men’s curiosity about the future, but to reveal important facts about God’s nature – His foreknowledge, His control over all the nations, and His plans for the people of God. In addition, fulfilled prophecies are an important evidence for the inspiration and trustworthiness of God’s Word. The two prophecies explained below are representative of the many prophecies found in the Old and New Testaments.

Daniel 2 – The book of Daniel was written in the sixth century BC, but its prophecies provide evidence for the fact that history is under God’s control. Daniel interprets the image in chapter 2 as four successive world empires, beginning with Babylon as the first empire (2:38). The fourth empire would be followed by many smaller kingdoms or nations, symbolized by the ten toes (2:41-43). These nations would continue until God’s kingdom, symbolized by the rock “cut out without human hands” smashing the image to bits (2:34), would be established on the earth (2:44).

This prophecy found a remarkable fulfilment in history. Babylon was succeeded by three other world empires, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, and Rome was divided up into many smaller kingdoms that still exist in Europe and around the Mediterranean Sea. The only part of the prophecy still unfulfilled is the arrival of the kingdom of God.

Micah 5:1 – According to the prophecy in Micah 5:1, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The Gospels tell us that although the parents of Jesus lived in Nazareth, because of a census in the Roman Empire, Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem, Joseph’s ancestral home town, where Jesus was born (Luke 2:4-7).

Conclusion

While the Bible is self-authenticating, i.e., the books of Scripture themselves testify to their God-inspired truth, the manuscript evidence, as well

as the archaeological and prophetic evidence, confirms the reliability of Scripture. The Dead Sea Scrolls and other manuscript finds have demonstrated the textual reliability of the Bible; and the many archaeological discoveries support the historical reliability of Scripture. While archaeology cannot prove that the Bible is true, it does confirm the historical background of the Bible. "What biblical archaeology offers to us is the widening of the environment against which we may see the Bible and its world. The canvas is now larger and the context wider."⁹ Finally, the fulfilment of Bible prophecies confirms the Bible's claim that "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21, NKJV).

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References

¹The Masoretes (AD 500 - 1000) were Jewish scholars who added the vowel points to the Hebrew consonantal text.

²Gleason A. Archer, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), 25.

³Charles Leach, *Our Bible: How We Got It* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, n.d.), 145.

⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Book and the Parchments*, revised edition (London: Marshall and Pickering, 1991), 170.

⁵*Ibid.*, 163.

⁶Sir Frederic Kenyon, *The Story of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1967), 113.

⁷William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1956), 176.

⁸F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1960), 91.

⁹Edgar Jones, *Discoveries and Documents* (London: Epworth Press, 1974), 4.

