

The Relationship Between Archaeology and the Bible

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Not long ago, a colleague asked me to provide some evidences from archaeology that he could use to support the authenticity of the Bible. Our conversation stimulated some thought on my part and this paper.

For us to begin to understand the relationship between archaeology and the Bible, we first need to define the nature of each entity. Thus, this essay will first address two questions: “What is the Bible?” and “What is archaeology?” Then we will discuss the relationship between archaeology and the Bible.

What Is the Bible?

This question is not seeking a description of the Bible but, rather, is asking what, in essence, is the Bible? For example, if I were to ask, “What is the Gettysburg Address?” one could answer, “A speech made by Abraham Lincoln to commemorate a Civil War battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.” That answer is a statement about what the Gettysburg Address is, not a description of what Mr. Lincoln said during that address.

When it comes to the Bible, however, the answer is more obscure. Actually, it is impossible to answer “What is the Bible?” in a universal sense. What makes answering impossible has nothing to do with the Bible and everything to do with the one answering the question.¹ Were I to ask the combined membership of the Society of Biblical Literature (an American scholarly organization) this question, the answers would range across a wide spectrum. At one end would be those who believe the Bible is a humanly-collated work, crafted in the Persian or Hellenistic periods. According to this perspective, it contains myths, stories, and

¹J. Maxwell Miller, “Approaches to the Bible through History and Archaeology: Biblical History as a Discipline.” *Biblical Archaeologist*, Fall, 1982, 211.

fiction, with no central purposes or themes. The Bible was created by politically motivated people who never saw, heard, or even necessarily believed in the same God, or so this scenario dictates.

At the other end of the spectrum would be those who believe the Bible was solely the work of God. He spoke and King James wrote it down. To those who hold this view, there is no possibility for errors on any level. Even punctuation was inspired, because who could know more about punctuation than God?

In attitude, these two extremes are much alike. Neither view has a need for archaeology, history, or even biblical languages. Both groups suppose that their theories are so exact that they already know what they need to know about the Bible. Any new piece of data is either ignored or forced within the parameters of these opposing theories. Information from any quarter may be unsettling, so data outside the control of the theories is under suspicion.

The interest of this paper is removed from the similarities between these extremes. I would, however, like to point out the initial problem we confront by the use of an illustration. Suppose I placed a Bible on a table. On one side sits the most radical proponent of the historical-critical method. On the other side sits the most extreme fundamentalist. If both persons sitting at the table were invited to give a lecture entitled "What is the Bible?" the only similarities between their presentations would be their opening remarks. Everything that followed, including the biblical references or examples they used, their points of reference, the sources quoted, their manner of dating the biblical books and stories, and their conclusions would be decidedly antagonistic to each other's presentations. Yet, the Bible used would be the same.

The dilemma is plain to see. If views about the Bible differ so widely, it is clear that the perceived relationship between archaeology and the Bible will also be affected. Those who believe the Bible is the verbally-dictated Word of God will place the reliability of the Bible so high above archaeology that archaeology is utterly useless. If God communicated directly, what else is there to learn? On the other hand, those who see the Bible as a late, fictitious, human work will tend to ignore any archaeological connections to the Bible. What connections they do make will be made to literature and material culture concurrent to the time they place the creation of the Bible. Their theories have already placed the Bible outside of the Bible's own historical settings.

There has been, however, among the broad middle ground of Bible students and scholars (conservative and liberal) a tacit acceptance of the idea that somehow archaeology provides a neutral setting from which the Bible can be evaluated. Within conservative circles, archaeology has been seen as the champion of the Bible. While in recent decades most conservative scholars have become too sophisticated as to say archaeology "proves" the truthfulness of the Bible, their use of archaeology has shown that conclusion to be inherent in their beliefs. Liberals, likewise, have subscribed to the same conclusion, although within a different paradigm.

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Conservative and liberal alike would suggest that the one objective way by which the reliability of the Bible can be tested (and thereby answer the question, “What is the Bible?”) is via some objective source, like archaeology. Such a conclusion suggests that archaeology can somehow help us evaluate the Bible. To test that thesis we need first to answer the question, “What is archaeology?”

What Is Archaeology?

Here is my own definition of archaeology:

Archaeology is an intentional scholarly discipline of uncovering the story of the human past. It largely depends on ancient texts, excavations, and archaeological surveys, but can also gather data from geology, palaeobotany, linguistics, and any discipline that provides information about the past.

Archaeology appears to be the perfect medium for recovering biblical history. For over 100 years archaeologists have been digging in the land where the Bible stories took place. The Bible itself has a broad spectrum of interpretations, but archaeology has controls. W. F. Albright (widely viewed as the father of biblical archaeology) set forth the idea that ancient literary documents need some type of “external evidence” for evaluating their “ultimate historicity.”² By “external evidence” he meant archaeology. Explicit in his thesis was the idea that ancient documents were not objective because they had to conform to ancient writing patterns and other societal pressures. But archaeology provides a means for reliably evaluating ancient texts. His idea that archaeology is the reality check of ancient documents has become the norm among archaeologists. It seems to make logical sense.

Ancient literary sources, like modern literature, were diverse. For example, one cannot possibly accept the Enuma Elish and other ancient myths on the same level of truthfulness as the book of Jeremiah, so having an independent (i.e., objective) source for evaluating ancient literary sources could be seen as a god-send for historians. This view of archaeology as a check on literary sources has been assumed by all spectrums of scholarship (and laity), except for the two extremes of scholarship (as described above).

There is a problem, however. Some professionally conducted archaeological work seems to repudiate the biblical stories. For example, the site of et-Tell, assumed by many to be biblical Ai, when excavated, produced no evidence of the Israelites. Max Miller wrote about the situation this way:

That biblical Ai is to be equated with present-day et-Tell is an obvious conclusion, therefore, and one which scholars were agreed upon before any excavations were undertaken at the site. According to Josh. 7-8, Ai was a fortified city at the time of the Israelite invasion (this is implied by the description of Joshua’s military tactics and confirmed by the reference to the city gate in 7.5); it was conquered

²“The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archaeology.” *BASOR* 74, 1939, 12.

and burned by Joshua; and it remained “forever a heap of ruins” (*tēl ’olām*; 8:28) from that day onward. However, archaeological excavations at et-Tell have indicated rather conclusively that the site was virtually unoccupied following c. 2000 B.C.E. except for a small unfortified village which stood on the old ruins c. 1200-1050 B.C.E.³

When the excavators of et-Tell began their project they expected to find evidence of biblical Ai: some stratigraphic assemblage belonging to the Late Bronze Age. If the excavators found what they had expected, they would have found evidence of a fortified settlement which ended in a layer of ash. Remember, according to Josh 8:28 the Israelites destroyed and burned Ai. When archaeologists excavated the site supposed to be biblical Ai, they found nothing from the period they expected—nothing, that is, from the time of Joshua (the Late Bronze Age)—no city, no destruction, and no ash layer. Because archaeologists found nothing, the assumption is that “nothing” is *evidence* against the reliability of the biblical text. This “nothing” evidence has a number of different names. Amihai Mazar calls it “silent” evidence,⁴ while Miller calls it “negative archaeological evidence.”⁵

The dilemma is clear: the Bible said one thing, but archaeology did not find what the Bible said. Miller concludes,

The fact is that the available archaeological evidence simply does not square very well with the biblical account of the conquest regardless of what one proposes as a date. If the Bible and archaeology are to be correlated *vis-à-vis* the conquest, the claims of the biblical account will have to be modified in some fashion and/or some of the archaeological evidence will have to be explained away.⁶

A similar dilemma is present at other sites mentioned in the Bible (e.g., Gibeon, Jericho).

It should surprise no reader that some have decided that archaeology is the more reliable of the two, suggesting that the Bible is, thus, an unreliable historical document. In fact, archaeology has been widely used by critics as evidence against the Bible. So, rather than concluding that archaeology proves the reliability of the Bible, it has been seen to disprove the reliability of the Bible.

On the other hand, not one sherd of evidence has been found that disagrees with any biblical statement or story. As Larry Herr has written, “I cannot think of a single instance where archaeological finds have leveled a broadside against any central Biblical [*sic*] truths as we interpret them.”⁷ It is not that archaeolo-

³J. M. Miller, “Archaeology and the Israelite Conquest of Canaan: Some Methodological Observations,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 109 (1977): 88.

⁴Amihai Mazar, “The Iron Age I,” in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, edited by Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 281.

⁵J. M. Miller, “Site Identification: A Problem Area in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship,” *Zeitschrift Des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins* 99 (1983): 121.

⁶J. M. Miller, 1977, 88.

⁷“What Archaeology Can and Cannot Do.” *Ministry*, February, 1983, 29.

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gists have found evidence conflicting with the Bible stories that bothers them, but that in some cases they have found nothing that confirms those stories.

Archaeology has twice the data of other disciplines. The data are what we have found and what we have not found. Remember the quotation read earlier from Max Miller? What he wrote was, "Archaeological excavations at et-Tell have indicated rather conclusively that the site was virtually unoccupied following c. 2000 B.C.E."⁸ What he meant was, "We did not find anything from the Late Bronze Age. Since we did not find anything, it means the Israelites could not have conquered Ai, because it did not exist; therefore the Bible story is more of a myth than a reality."

What has confused Miller is his belief that his *interpretation* and the evidence are one and the same. Nothing was found at et-Tell that confirmed previous assumptions about the Joshua 5 story about Ai. Nothing was found, but his interpretation tries to make something of it. In archaeology, making something out of nothing is poor methodology. Finding nothing is nothing, not something.⁹

It is true that in most disciplines what you do not find tells you about the properties of what you are examining. In the case of archaeology, however, where all finds are accidental, where testing cannot be repeated, where the literary sources which some assume they are testing had an agenda far removed from the testing ability of archaeology, finding nothing is nothing. Making non-evidence into evidence only assures the results will be skewed.

Long ago David Hackett Fischer collated a list of the false assumptions used by historians. One of those false assumptions was what he called the "Fallacy of the negative proof." Wrote Fischer, "The fallacy of the negative proof is an attempt to sustain a factual proposition merely by negative evidence. It occurs whenever a historian declares that 'there is no evidence that X is the case,' and then proceeds to affirm or assume that not-X is the case."¹⁰

There is a fundamental difference between what is found and what is not found. One may argue about the purpose or meaning of an object found, and over time interpretations may change, but what is found never loses the reality of its existence. Non-evidence, on the other hand, has no reality outside of the interpreters. It exists only in their minds.

In the last century a common criticism of the Bible was its mention of the Hittites. The critics knew they had never existed because they had evidence that they did not exist. Their evidence was that no other documentary evidence men-

⁸Miller, op. cit.

⁹When I was a child, I collected coins. From the way some archaeologists interpret their data, my boyhood collection was the best coin collection in the world. I did not have the double-struck 1955 penny for which I used to look. I did not have a lot of coins. All those are now in my collection because I now know, as an archeologist, that not having something is the same as having something. In other words, not having coins and having coins is the same thing! When I combine what I did not have and what I did have, my collection becomes the greatest in the world. A little illogical, is it not?

¹⁰David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 47.

tioned the Hittites, nor had they been discovered at that time by archaeology. We know what happened: the Hittite capital and other major sites were discovered. If non-evidence is truly evidence, where is the evidence now that the Hittites did not exist? It does not now exist and it never did exist, except in the minds of the interpreters. Ignorance is not a valid basis of evidence. Kenneth Kitchen said it best when he wrote,

Absence of evidence is not, and should not be confused with, evidence of absence. The same criticism is to be leveled at the abuse of this concept in archaeology: the syndrome: “we did not find it, so it never existed!” instead of the more proper formulation: “evidence is currently lacking; we may have missed it or it may have left no trace”; particularly when 5 percent or less of a mound is dug, leaving 95 percent or more untouched, unknown, and so not in evidence.¹¹

What others have called “silent evidence” or “negative archaeology evidence” is really “nonevidence.”¹² Such “evidence” does not exist, making Miller’s conclusions about et-Tell/Ai dubious at best.

Another reason some have been misled in their conclusions is that archaeology is less than it is generally acknowledged to be. For example, archaeology is not a science, despite the idea of the “science” of archaeology. Science implies the ability to repeat an experiment and to predict the outcome of an experiment. Archaeologists destroy the evidence as they find it. Soil layers and other loci, once excavated, can never be examined by others no matter how carefully we record the data. Rocks, walls, and objects removed cannot be replaced. Archaeologists also cannot predict, except in the broadest outlines, what they will find. If they could, there would be no reason to continually begin new projects. To discover what we do not know is part of the mystique of archaeology.

In addition, archaeology is neither objective nor is it a reliable means for evaluating ancient literary sources. Albright and those who have accepted his premise have confused “objective” with “accidental.” Albright assumed that since archaeologists have little control over what they find, it means that what they have found is objective. It is not. What archaeologists uncover are accidental finds. William Dever has also labeled archaeological finds as “pure luck,”¹³ which is another way of labeling them as accidental finds.

¹¹Kenneth A. Kitchen, “New Directions in Biblical Archaeology: Historical and Biblical Aspects,” in *Biblical Archaeology Today: 1990* (Jerusalem, Israel: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), 48.

¹²In an article to be published in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* titled, “The Book of Joshua and Its Evaluation by Non-Evidence,” I detail the current negative archaeological assessment of the Book of Joshua, due to evidence not-found at certain archaeological sites. In that article I conclude that the use of nonevidence is illogical and a distraction from reaching more reliable conclusions.

¹³William G. Dever, *Archaeology and Biblical Studies: Retrospects and Prospects*, the William C. Winslow Lectures, 1972 (Evanston, Illinois: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1974), pp. 41, 46.

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An objective measuring method assumes a measured control of questions whereby what is measured can be evaluated. Assuming archaeological finds to be an objective test of ancient literary sources is like assuming that an examination on American history created by randomly selecting questions from books in a city library is objective, since none of the students knew from which books the questions were taken. Is it an “objective” evaluation of their knowledge of American history if some of the questions chosen came from books about Greek literature, geology, and animal husbandry? Obviously not.

Neither the Bible writers nor the other ancient literary writers were given a list of questions that modern archaeologists were going to ask. It is just *assumed* that archaeology can find examples or evidence of what we think the ancient writers meant. What better example of the post-modern self-absorption can be given than to assume that ancient writers would or could leave the evidences for which we seek or that we are justified in concluding that those stories are fiction. I do not have in mind only the Bible, because there are other examples in ancient Near Eastern literature where historical sources recount events at sites that, when excavated, have yielded no evidence of those events (e.g., Thutmose III’s destruction of Megiddo [he even names the wall he built around Megiddo],¹⁴ the new settlers of Samaria after the Assyrian conquest,¹⁵ etc.).

It is unfortunate that so little interest has been taken in testing the reliability of archaeology for predicting the reliability of *any* ancient literary work, much less the Bible. When, and if, those studies are done, I believe they will show that archaeological excavations are not able to reliably determine which events depicted in ancient sources are true or not. The one study I have found, published in 1983 and written by B. S. Isserlin, shows that archaeology has not produced evidence of the more recent conquests and destructions of the Norman and Anglo-Saxon invasions of England or the intrusion of the Muslims into North Africa or Palestine.¹⁶ If archaeology cannot find evidence of the destructions produced in these much more recent invasions, how much less likely is archaeology to find evidences for destructions thousands of years previous to those events?¹⁷

¹⁴James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (London: Histories & Mysteries of Man, 1988), Part 2, par. 429-433.

¹⁵Gabriel Barkay, “The Iron Age II-III” in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven: Yale UP), 328, writes, “The exiles must have brought with them elements of religion and culture that have yet to be identified in the archaeological record, though some attempts have been made in recent years to ascribe pottery types and personal names in inscriptions to these populations.”

¹⁶B. S. J. Isserlin, “The Israelite Conquest of Canaan: A Comparative Review of the Arguments Applicable,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly (Quarterly Statement)* 115 (1983): 85-94.

¹⁷In reviewing a recent book about *The Building Program of Herod the Great*, by Duane W. Roller, I was struck by how little we know of Herod’s building program. Were it not for the writings of Josephus, little could be said of Herod or his reign. Much less sure is the evidence from the Late Bronze Age.

There is a difference between archaeology and the archaeologist. Archaeology is the data that are discovered. Archaeologists are the ones who craft the theories from that data. Archaeologists only rarely argue about the data that are discovered, but we are forever arguing over the theories based on that data. It is true that no data were collected that helps us with the story of Joshua's conquest of Ai, but it is equally clear we do not know why no data was found. To suggest that we do know why is theory, not fact.

Back to the Bible

What is often overlooked in the discussions about the relationship between archaeology and the Bible is the purposes of the biblical writers. The biblical writers were writing what they saw as redemptive history. I believe what they wrote was true, but what they wrote was not complete, nor was it intended to be. For example, the stories about Abraham are contained in Genesis 12–25. These chapters can be read in an hour or so. A few things must have been left out of the Genesis account if Abraham's life, said to be 175 years long (Gen 25:7), can be summarized in an hour. In actuality, Genesis 12–25 is not a biography of Abraham, but rather a collection of inspired stories that detail YHWH's interaction with Abraham. Each of these stories has spiritual value and truly happened in history, but none of them is complete, meaning they give us only the barest of details, as all stories must do. They recount the events, not the moment by moment details.

This basic incompleteness is also true of the stories of the Book of Joshua, including the story of Ai (Josh 8). Despite the many assumptions about that story, we know very little about the account. First, we are not positive that Ai is et-Tell. Many of my archaeological colleagues would disagree with me on this point, but et-Tell can in no way be classified as easily conquered and, even with only a "few" people, its defensive setting is formidable.¹⁸ Compared to Jericho, et-Tell is much larger, more imposing, and a more easily defended site, with every advantage over any force with evil intent. On the other hand, nothing in the biblical story tells us what the city of Ai looked like. The Joshua story implies that it must have been small and appeared to be easily overrun. It is most often just called "the ruin" (which is the meaning of Ai). For all we know, the few people living there may have been living among and in the ruins of previous cities, or with tents interspersed among the ruins. Their tent city may have been only near et-Tell or on et-Tell. The biblical writers just do not provide us those details. They recorded only what they needed to convey their message, not what we need to "prove" their point.

In the article quoted above (1977), Miller assumes that Ai had to be a substantially fortified city because it is said to have a gate.¹⁹ On the other hand,

¹⁸No one who has ever visited et-Tell would assume it was an easily conquered place.

¹⁹Josh 8:29; "Archaeology and the Israelite Conquest of Canaan: Some Methodological Observations," 88.

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everything about the conquest of Ai implies that its settlement looked easily conquerable (Josh 7:3). While Jericho endured a seven-day siege, the Israelites evidently thought they were going to conquer the inhabitants of Ai without a siege or major effort.

Additionally, at Megiddo (Stratum IX) a free-standing gate of Late Bronze Age construction was found with no corresponding wall.²⁰ Writes Gonen, “Free-standing gates, though not a common phenomenon, are not inconceivable, for gates served more than a defensive function. The gate was the ceremonial entrance, the town showpiece, and the focus of trade, public gatherings, litigation, news reports, and even cult.”²¹ In other words, even though a gate is mentioned by the biblical writers, they still provide virtually no information about the physical properties of Ai. Even my grandfather’s house had a fenced-in yard and a gate, which I could have jumped over as a teenager, but his house was not a heavily fortified city.

Consider also that the text tells us that Joshua burned Ai and left it in ruins (Josh 8:28). Is it possible that the people of Ai lived among the ruins of a “city,” with tents making up some of their homes, and the burning of that city left nothing for archaeologists to find? The biblical story is a condensed version of some of the facts.

The Bible’s history stretches over virtually the entire spectrum of the historic period, yet is encapsulated in one relatively thin volume. The odds of finding a table or an inscription mentioning a biblical person, much less an event, must be astronomical. Thousands of events were happening every day. The Canaanites and others settled in the land of Canaan had their own perspective on life and events. Their notations are unlikely to interact with the Bible writers. The pagans of the biblical period had their own agendas far removed from the agenda of the biblical writers. With agendas at distant poles, subject matters, including people and events, are not likely to overlap.

Remember, the events mentioned in the Bible, no matter how spectacular, most often occurred in one day. If the days of the events specifically mentioned in the Bible were counted they would surely add up to less than 500, compared to the million or so days of the Old Testament period.²² The Israelites were not the only peoples who migrated anew into Canaan or occupied cities they had not built.²³ The cross-ethnic tensions expressed in the biblical stories have always been part of human history.

²⁰Rivka Gonen, “The Late Bronze Age,” in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, edited by Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 219.

²¹*Ibid.*; consider the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

²²This is a guess, with no way of knowing the total number of days for the Old Testament period, but whatever the number of days involved in the biblical events, they are few when compared to the number of days in the historic period.

²³Both the Philistines and the Amorites are examples of other peoples not indigenous to Canaan, but who migrated and settled in the land of Canaan.

Think about it: archaeologists assume they will readily recover evidence of the burning of Ai, which lasted only a few hours at most, which occurred over 3,000 years ago, for which we have few concrete details. Even the details we have are within the most summary of stories. At the same time, archaeologists show little concern to differentiate ethnic-based conflicts outside of the Late Bronze-Iron Age transition period. The reason for this contrast is the dependence of archaeology on the biblical story line, while depreciating these same stories. It surprises me that more archaeologists are not suspicious about the assumed ability of archaeology to predict and interpret biblical stories when they ignore the same questions in earlier periods.

Archaeology and the Bible are headed in the same direction, but on different planes.²⁴ The number of events mentioned in the Bible, compared to all historical events, is too few in number and too poorly quantified to be found dependable. The biblical writers were not expansive enough with the details. They chose their words carefully, leaving us the message that mattered most to them: a picture of the power and presence of YHWH.

I am not trying to depreciate the biblical story or the value of archaeology. I am only trying to point out that most of what we think we know about the conquest of Ai (and other cities mentioned in ancient literature) has come from Bible story books, our cultural understanding of words like “city,” and other pre-suppositions we bring to the biblical stories, not the Bible. Past expectations and assumptions about archaeology place a weight of possibilities upon it that do not exist.

I have no doubt that the Bible stories are true and happened in time and history, but the biblical writers were unconcerned with the details that would have helped archaeologists the most. I do not believe that the biblical writers’ “knowledge was too limited” or that their “observations were too imperfect to enable them to record history with unimpeachable accuracy.”²⁵ I believe they were writing about God and his amazing power of redemption, not providing detailed military descriptions of battles or the size of walls or directions to specific locations for people living 3,000 years later. I believe what they did provide was accurate, but not complete.

At the same time some archaeologists have been very unimaginative about the many possibilities of what the lack of data at a site may mean. Writes Brandon,

It is just as likely that a sequence of events, such as the invasion of Canaan first by Israelites and then by Philistines, would leave many different traces in the stratigraphic record all over the country. It is also possible that a sequence of historical events may leave no traces

²⁴Larry Herr describes the difference between archaeology and the Bible as archaeology being “object oriented,” while the Bible is “personality-oriented.” op. cit.

²⁵Lawrence T. Geraty, “Can Archaeology Really Prove the Bible?” *Ministry*, November (1983): 29.

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in the stratigraphic record at all. Or it may be the case that the stratigraphic traces which were originally left behind by events have been eroded by natural forces or destroyed by later stratigraphic processes. It seems most likely that, in excavating strata of the land of Israel at the time of the Conquest or settlement, all of these possibilities will be found as each site yields its own stratigraphic sequence. The archaeologists must therefore contend with the fact that the inference of historical events—the invasion of Canaan first by Israelites, then by Philistines, for example—is far from self-evident or self-explanatory from a stratigraphic standpoint. Again, the archaeological evidence does not *dictate* the historical “story” that can be told from it.²⁶

The problem is that both the biblical and archaeological communities of scholars have shared a too simplistic view of archaeology and Scripture. It is time to reconsider those ideals.

Relationship between Archaeology and the Bible

What then is the relationship between archaeology and the Bible? Archaeology is not the test of the Bible. What archaeologists find does not even confirm the Bible.²⁷ To acknowledge archaeology as the “test” or even to imagine that it “confirms” the Bible assumes archaeology is somehow superior to the Bible. It suggests that archaeology has solid reliability, while the Bible needs to be tested. But archaeology has *not* proven itself to be reliable. How can it assume a position as a judge of literary works when it has no direct means of testing those literary texts?

Words like “confirm” imply “prove,” which is beyond the reach of archaeology. If the Bible’s message is spiritual, how can archaeology test that aspect? Yes, the biblical writers wrote of events based in time and place, but there is nothing intrinsically available within archaeology that admits to being able to test literary accounts. Almost everyone who has written about the relationship between archaeology and the Bible says that archaeology cannot prove the Bible, but the way many use archaeology demonstrates that their words and belief do not match. To suggest that archaeology has “disproved” the Bible is to imply that it could “prove” the Bible, something few would acknowledge. Should we conclude that while the Bible can be “disproved,” it cannot be proved? Critical scholars are, at present, the most visible adherents to a prove-the-Bible mental-

²⁶Fredric Brandfon, “The Limits of Evidence: Archaeology and Objectivity,” *MAARAV: A Journal for the Study of the Northwest Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 4, no. 1 (1987): 27, emphasis in the original.

²⁷Anyone who knows me knows with what respect (i.e., awe) I hold the memory of Siegfried Horn. As curator of the museum named in his honor, I highly respect Dr. Horn’s scholarship and influence on the Seventh-day Adventist church. I was even co-editor of a festschrift in his honor. Titles like *The Spade Confirms the Book*, however, give a false impression of the relationship between archaeology and the Bible.

ity. Otherwise, how could they believe that archaeology has disproved the Bible? The views that it can prove or disprove the Bible are equally false.

Archaeology can help us understand the Bible by providing cultural settings for the biblical stories, supplying additional examples of rarely used words from related languages, giving us an idea of material cultures of the biblical world, and occasionally yielding the specific names of people mentioned in the Bible.²⁸ Where archaeology is especially not very helpful is with details of events. Events were short-lived and poorly described in Scripture. Even if events mentioned in literary sources could easily be detected and correctly identified by archaeology, the multiple millions of events not mentioned in the Bible would more likely be found—due to their sheer numerical superiority—than the few mentioned in the Bible (and other ancient literary documents).

On the other hand, the Bible is helpful to the archaeologist. We would hardly know who the Ammonites were if the Bible did not provide for us their geographical and historical settings. Archaeology has done much to enlighten our understanding of the Ammonites, but we would not be asking certain questions without the Bible.²⁹ While Egyptian sources provide a detailed picture of the Egyptian incursion of the Sea Peoples, we would have little idea of the dynamics of their settlement on the Canaanite coast without the Bible. The Bible presents the resulting Canaanite inter-tribal conflicts in a way Egyptian literature does not approach. It is even doubtful whether the Israelites themselves would be of any significant interest if the Bible had not introduced them to us.

The biblical literature stands on its own. It does not need archaeology to confirm it any more than archaeology needs the Bible to confirm its existence or truthfulness or anything else. The Bible has its own identity and usefulness apart from archaeology. Archaeology is separate, not senior to the Bible. And, in a secular sense, the Bible is separate, not senior to archaeology.

The biblical and archaeological stories, while they complement each other, are not very similar stories. It is the complementary association of archaeology and the Bible that is valuable. Blending those few places where they intersect helps both the archaeologist and the biblical student. Archaeology (i.e., the data) and the Bible are related to each other in the sense that they are both records of the past. The Bible provides a redemptive history of that past, while archaeology uncovers the material culture of that past. In specific areas, they rarely interact, with a few amazing connections. Neither can “confirm” the other, because they are telling different stories, providing unique messages.

Archaeology and the Bible are more like parallel lines. Both are sources of information with two different views. The Bible provides us with a religious

²⁸Geraty provides a good, expanded summary of what biblical studies have gained from archaeology, 1983, 29-30.

²⁹Cf. Randall Wayne Younker, *The Emergence of the Ammonites: Sociocultural Transformation on the Transjordan Plateau during the Late Bronze/Iron Age Transition*, unpublished dissertation, University of Arizona, 1997.

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story. Archaeology provides data by accidental finds. They both tell us about the past. Archaeology speaks to the material culture of the past, with an occasional find of a written source which most often tells us nothing about a biblical event (e.g., the Mesha Stele and House of David Stele). Why should we expect otherwise? These parallel lines are not very close, but when used together, we gain a better understanding of the broad outline of the biblical and historical past. They are both sources of information about the past: one a religious history and the other an accidentally-found, material culture based artifact.

People have banned the Bible and been burned for believing the Bible. The Bible and its stories have remained the same. Those who read its pages must decide for themselves its value and how, or if, that value will be applied to their lives, but nothing in their evaluation changes the intrinsic worth of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God. It stands the test of its own validity, which is far beyond the reach of archaeology.