

# Digging Up the Bible

by Keith W. Stump

## ILLUSTRATING BIBLICAL HISTORY

*Archaeological discoveries offer insights into the history recorded in the Bible.*

**W**HAT TYPE OF clothing did the patriarch Abraham and his family wear? Was there really a King David or a Pontius Pilate? How was a crucifixion performed in Jesus' day?

These are questions that biblical archaeologists can help us answer.

Biblical archaeology, the study of the remains of Near East civilizations, is important because it enhances our understanding and appreciation of the Bible. It rounds out our picture of the history, customs and daily life of the Israelites and surrounding nations.

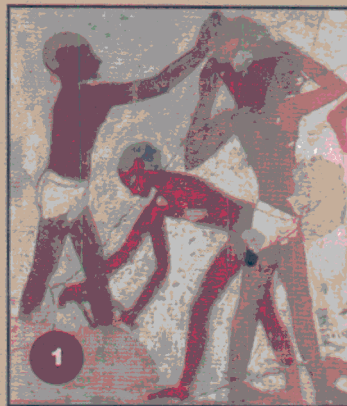
### Silencing the Skeptics

Archaeology also provides extrabiblical corroboration of biblical events.

Consider the example of Belshazzar (Daniel 5). Daniel tells us that Belshazzar was the last king of Babylon. Yet for centuries Belshazzar's name was found nowhere outside of the Bible. Historical records named Nabonidus as Babylon's final king. Some scholars of the last century, therefore, rejected Daniel's account, labeling it one of the Bible's many "historical mistakes."

But in 1853, archaeologists discovered small clay cylinders at Ur in Mesopotamia, inscribed with accounts of the rebuilding of Ur's ziggurat (temple tower) by King Nabonidus. The inscriptions

Archaeology provides interesting illustrations of some key events in biblical history. Here are just a few.



**1. Tomb of Rekh-mi-re** (15th century B.C.) A wall painting in an Egyptian tomb in the Valley of the Nobles at Thebes shows foreign slaves making mud bricks, recalling the enslaved Israelites' forced brickmaking (Exodus 1:14; 5:7).



**2. Israel Stele** (13th century B.C.) The name *Israel* is inscribed in hieroglyphs on a stone slab found in 1896 at Thebes. It is the only mention of Israel in all Egyptian records, and the oldest evidence outside the Bible for Israel's existence. Israel is listed as one of the peoples in western Asia during the reign of Ramses II's son, Merneptah (c.1213-1203 B.C.), offering evidence that the Israelites were already settled in Canaan (the Promised Land) by that time.

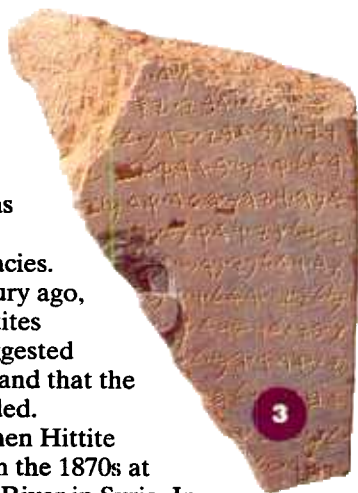
concluded with prayers for Nabonidus' health—and for his eldest son and co-regent, *Belshazzar!*

References to the Hittites (as in 2 Kings 7) were also once regarded as scriptural inaccuracies. Until a little more than a century ago, nothing was known of the Hittites outside of the Bible. Some suggested there had been a scribal error and that the Assyrians were actually intended.

The Bible was vindicated when Hittite monuments were discovered in the 1870s at Carchemish on the Euphrates River in Syria. In 1906, excavations at Boghazkoy in Turkey uncovered thousands of Hittite documents.

A more recent example: Some scholars doubted that biblical King David actually lived. But in 1993, Israeli archaeologist Avraham Biran discovered a ninth-century B.C. stone tablet among the rubble of a wall at Tel Dan in northern Israel.

The 13 lines of Aramaic script on the tablet commemorate the defeat of Baasha, king of Israel, by Asa of "the House of David." This provided not only the first corroboration of their warfare (described in 1 Kings 15), but also the first mention of the name *David* outside the Bible.



With only about 200 of 5,000 known sites in Palestine excavated or partially excavated, much potential evidence of this kind remains to be unearthed.

## Not an Exact Science

While archaeology corroborates biblical events, it would be erroneous to suggest that all archaeologists accept the Bible as historically accurate in every detail.

Archaeology cannot be a precise science. Archaeologists must *interpret* what they discover. It is not always easy to distinguish strata (layers of debris), to date artifacts, or to interpret their significance. The problem: Equally competent archaeologists can interpret the same material evidence in diametrically opposite ways.

If an archaeologist suggests that a biblical event did not occur as described or that it happened at a different time than recorded in the Bible, such can be only a personal *opinion*, not a fact of history.

Archaeologists have long disagreed over the date of the destruction of Jericho by Joshua (Joshua 6). During the 1950s, British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon concluded that Jericho was destroyed about 1550 B.C. According to Kenyon's analysis, Jericho did not even exist in 1400 B.C., the date some feel is indicated by the

**3. House of David Inscription** (ninth century B.C.) A stone tablet discovered in 1993 provides the first mention outside the Bible of the House of David. See main article for details.

monument found in the imperial palace at Nimrud depicts Assyria's King Shalmaneser III receiving tribute from kings and

Spring to the Pool of Siloam within Jerusalem's city walls during the Assyrian siege of 701 B.C. (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:30).

**4. Moabite Stone** (ninth century B.C.) An inscribed basalt monument erected by

Mesha, king of Moab, tells of the revolt of the Moabites after the death of King Ahab of Israel. It gives Mesha's side of the story recorded in 2 Kings 3.

vassals, including Israel's King Jehu.

**7. Sennacherib's Prism** (seventh century B.C.) A six-sided clay prism discovered in Nineveh and inscribed with Sennacherib's own account of his siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C., which made Hezekiah a prisoner in his



own royal city (2 Kings 19). It is often called the "Taylor Prism" after its first owner.

**5. The Black Obelisk** (ninth century B.C.) A

**6. The Siloam Inscription** (eighth century B.C.) An inscription carved in the rock wall of Hezekiah's tunnel by a Jewish workman describes the construction of the underground conduit. The tunnel brought vital stores of water from Gihon

**8. Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle** (sixth century B.C.) A Babylonian account of the siege of Jerusalem in 597 B.C., the appointment of Zedekiah as puppet king of Judah, and the Jews' exile to Babylon (2 Kings 24).

**9. Lachish Letters** (sixth century B.C.) Twenty-one military communiques, written on pottery fragments





**Egyptian tomb painting from Beni-Hasan (about 1900 B.C.) shows how Abraham's family might have dressed.**



**Bible's internal chronology.**

In 1990, Kenyon's work was reviewed by Bryant G. Wood, an archaeologist at the University of Toronto and an authority on Canaanite pottery. Wood's persuasive reevaluation of Kenyon's Jericho excavations concluded that Jericho did indeed fall about 1400 B.C.

### **Glimpses of Ancient Life**

Archaeology contributes to our understanding not only of biblical history, but also of the daily life and experience of people in biblical times—their customs, dress, work, interests and entertainment.

How would Abraham and his family have dressed? In a tomb at Beni-Hasan in Egypt, a wall painting shows a caravan of West Semites from Palestine who visited the Egyptian court early in the 19th century B.C. It gives a visual description of the way the patriarchs could have appeared at that time.

What was the average height of an Israelite during the time of the judges (14th to

11th centuries B.C.)? The roof height of excavated houses of that period suggests the typical Israelite was only about 5 feet tall.

Another example of how archaeology brings to life the ancient world is the abundance of Assyrian art uncovered in the great palaces of that empire—huge winged bulls, monuments commemorating victories, frescoes and bas-reliefs of battle scenes.

Such art, scattered today in museums around the world, vividly illustrates the formidable nature of the empire described by prophets like Jonah and Isaiah (Jonah 3:3; Isaiah 5:26-30). The same can be said of Babylon's spectacular ruins, such as the magnificent Ishtar Gate, now reassembled in a Berlin museum.

Finds also clarify obscure biblical statements. For



during Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Lachish (Jeremiah 34:6-7). They provide strong corroborative evidence for the historicity of the captivity and exile.

**10. Nabonidus Cylinder** (sixth century B.C.) Clay cylinder names Belshazzar (Daniel 5:29-30) as son of Babylonian King Nabonidus. See main text for details.

**11. Cyrus Cylinder** (sixth century B.C.) A 9-inch-long clay cylinder, discovered at Babylon in 1879, records the city's conquest in 539 B.C. by Persia's King Cyrus the Great (Daniel 5:30; 6:28). Cyrus took the city by surprise, without a battle. Cyrus also describes his new religious policy of toleration, which allowed captive Jews to return home (Ezra 1:1-3).



century A.D.) Several hundred ancient manuscripts found in Judean wilderness caves near the Dead Sea beginning in 1947. The oldest extant manuscripts of the Old Testament, they include portions of every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther.

**12. Dead Sea Scrolls** (third century B.C. to first



The Dead Sea Scrolls point to the high degree of accuracy in the transmission of the Old Testament text and provide important information on Jewish history during the time between the Old and New Testaments.

**13. Pilate Inscription** (first century A.D.) A battered limestone slab found at Caesarea is the only known inscription from his lifetime naming Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus. Part of Pilate's name can be seen on the second line. The





example, ninth-century B.C. sacrificial horned altars have been unearthed at Megiddo and Beersheba.

These altars feature a projecting point on each of the four upper corners, explaining the Old Testament references to the "horns of the altar." The blood of sacrifices was sprinkled on these projections (Leviticus 4:7), and accused persons seeking refuge grasped them (1 Kings 1:50).

### Proof of the Bible?

Despite archaeology's valuable contributions, archaeology doesn't prove the Bible true. We cannot anchor our faith on the tattered remains of the past.



stone had been part of a building dedicated in honor of the Emperor Tiberius.

a Jewish male about 25 years old who was executed around the mid-first century A.D.



**14. Skeletal Remains of Crucified Man** (first century A.D.) A crucifixion victim found in 1968 in a tomb at Giv'at ha-Mivtar, northeast of Jerusalem, provides the first authenticated physical evidence of a crucifixion in biblical times. The left heel bone was still fixed by a nail. An inscription names the victim as Yehohanan (John),

**15. Gallio Inscription** (first century A.D.) An inscription from Delphi dated to A.D. 52 names Lucius Junius Gallio as proconsul of Achaia. The apostle Paul was brought before Gallio by his Jewish accusers during his first visit to Corinth (Acts 18:12).

**16. Rylands Papyrus** (about A.D. 130) A fragment of John's Gospel, discovered in Egypt, contains verses from chapter 18. It is the earliest surviving copy of a New Testament book and is now in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England.

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## A DAY AT ARMAGEDDON

Last year, I won a scholarship from the Biblical Archaeology Society (publisher of *Biblical Archaeology Review*) to dig at one of Israel's most important archaeological sites—Megiddo.

Megiddo, about 20 miles southeast of the port of Haifa in northern Israel, controlled one of the most strategic military and trade routes of antiquity. The *tel* of Megiddo (ancient mound or hill composed of remains of successive settlements) covers 15 acres and has more than 20 occupation layers. It overlooks the Plain of Megiddo or Valley of Jezreel, long identified as the site of Armageddon.

On a typical day's dig, we rolled out of bed at 4 a.m. After a hasty breakfast, we collected our equipment and walked up the tel to the trenches, beginning work by 4:45.

Our crew was assigned to open a new area just below the ramps leading up to Solomon's gates. Four other sites on Megiddo were being excavated at the same time, including the summer palace of Ahab and Jezebel, and a Canaanite altar/temple complex.

Excavations progress carefully and systematically. Working with picks, shovels, trowels, knives and brushes, we painstakingly, inch by inch, uncovered the mound's secrets. The items we found were charted, photographed or sketched.

The first three inches yielded a gold Roman earring!

During my two weeks on the dig, we reached the level of about 1500 B.C., uncovering city walls, foundations and floors. Among other ancient artifacts, we found a small carved lion, an Egyptian scarab and a small stone calf's head.

Our digging ended each day at 1 p.m., when it became too hot and windy to work. The rest of the day was devoted to pottery washing and sorting, discussing our finds and attending archaeology classes.

By 9 p.m., most of us were more than ready to go to bed—to dream of more scarabs, statues, rings and coins waiting to be found.

—Dennis Diehl

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