

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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Archaeology and the Bible by Phillip Climer

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The December 18, 1995, issue of *Time* magazine had as its cover story, "IS THE BIBLE FACT OR FICTION? Archaeologists in the Holy Land are shedding new light on what did—and didn't—occur in the greatest stories ever told." The article describes recent archaeological finds in Israel and surrounding areas, and then categorizes public and scholarly reaction to these finds into three main groupings: "Jewish and Christian Ultraconservatives," who do not believe any part of the Bible is fiction; "Atheists," who want to debunk the whole Bible; and "the moderate majority," who want to be sure that the Bible is scientifically "grounded in truth."

As Christians we fall into what *Time* calls the "Ultraconservative" group. We believe that the Bible is infallible not only in spiritual matters, but also in accounts with historical and geographical content.

When archaeologists excavate Biblical lands and, based on their findings, reach conclusions that differ with the historical account of

Scripture, how should a Christian respond? To say that we accept the Word of God by faith, whatever the claims of archaeology or any other branch of science, is the correct reply. However, making that statement without any further explanation may sound as though we are pitting blind irrational faith against rational scientific research. This essay is intended to demonstrate that while the science of archaeology may be reasonable, it is not truthful; and a faith that provides truth is much to be preferred over a research program that does not.

Of the other two groups mentioned in the magazine article, we can easily understand the "Atheists." We accept the Bible as true; they reject it. As *Time* points out, even when archaeology supports a Biblical narrative, the atheists are likely to reject both Scripture and science. Their position is one of faith, as much as is ours; it is just that the object of their faith is their own ideas. But what is one to make of the third category, the "moderate majority"?

Many Evangelicals fall into this category, for they are delighted whenever an archaeological find supports a part of Scripture, or as *Time*

says, “strengthens the Bible’s claim to historical accuracy.” But if a supportive archaeologist enhances Scripture’s claim to accuracy, does a scientific detractor weaken the Bible’s claim to truth? And if Christians accept only those archaeological findings that they agree with, can they not be justly accused of being childish in their refusal to face up to disagreeable facts?

The whole unfortunate enterprise of trying to verify the claims of Scripture with the findings of archaeology rests on a conflict between the science of archaeology and the Christian faith on the question, “What is truth?” To focus on this dispute, let us confront the claims of archaeology with the simple question, “How do you know?” The answer to this one question reveals the principles upon which are based all claims to knowledge and truth by any science, philosophy, or religion.

To begin with, we must know what the science of archaeology is, and the type of claims it makes. Secondly, we must compare and contrast archaeological information and Biblical truth. Finally, against this background, let us review the conflict that *Time* calls “fact vs. faith.”

Archaeological Information

Archaeology is “the scientific study of extinct peoples through skeletal remains, fossils, and objects of human workmanship (as implements, artifacts, monuments, or inscriptions) found in the earth” (*Webster’s Third International Dictionary of the English Language*, 1981). Archaeologists excavate and sift through the remains of ancient civilizations and then try to piece together their findings into a coherent picture of how the people of

that society lived, and how its institutions functioned.

Perhaps the most important artifact that any civilization leaves behind is its body of literature. Many societies in the ancient Middle East left their writings in stone (the hieroglyphs of Egypt), or on soft clay tablets that hardened into stone over time (the Babylonians and Assyrians). The ancient Hebrews apparently used paper or possibly animal skins. Since these materials decompose, documents written on them had to be recopied time and again. Archaeologists generally accept hieroglyphs and clay tablets as being more accurate than paper manuscripts, since the former are more likely to be the original writings. There is obviously much less room for error or editing in a document carved on stone than on a manuscript copy several times removed from the original.

The *Time* article gives several examples of archaeologists rejecting Biblical manuscripts in favor of their own theories based on other artifacts. The book of *Joshua*, chapter 6, records the destruction of the walls of Jericho, allowing the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua to conquer the city. *Time* tells us that after extensive excavations at the site of ancient Jericho, archaeologists have determined that the location was abandoned between about 1500-1100 BC. According to them, no walled cities existed during this time in this area of Canaan. Conservative Biblical scholars and archaeologists also disagree on the date of the Israelite entrance into Canaan, but they both agree that it falls well within the time range mentioned above. Given this chronology, modern archaeology concludes that the Hebrews moved onto vacant or sparsely

populated land. This thinking allows no walls to come tumbling down, and no city to conquer. The skeptics also doubt that Joshua even existed. Without a battle, who needs a general? Now let us ask the test question: How do they know that Jericho and its walls did not exist during this time period?

Just as our society paves over old streets and erects new buildings over the remains of old foundations, so ancient civilizations built towns and cities over the debris of earlier structures. When archaeologists excavate a site they divide it into different levels, each level or layer corresponding to a defined era of human habitation or abandonment. The methods by which a date for a particular level is determined are quite involved, and a detailed explanation of them is beyond the scope of this essay.

To gain some idea of what is involved, consider a future archaeologist excavating our civilization and finding only ceramic dishes up to a certain level. Above that level, he finds plastic and ceramic dishes. Suppose he also finds some sort of preserved calendar dated "1950" with the plastic dishes. He now has his dating "key": the calendar and the plastic dishes. This key tells him that at his initial site plastic dishes were not in use before 1950. If he encounters plastic dishes at any other site, he assumes that the level in which he finds them was inhabited in 1950 or later. At Jericho, the scientists found some sort of artifacts (probably pottery) at a certain level that allowed them to date that level at 1500-1100 BC, based upon their "key" with similar artifacts at other excavations. This particular level did not contain the foundations or remains of any city walls, buildings, or other structures that would

indicate a city. How to explain this discrepancy with the Biblical account? The earliest extant manuscript of the book of *Joshua* dates from a period hundreds of years after the events described in the book. Skeptics theorize that such a manuscript, in being recopied from a decaying original, could have been altered by a zealous scribe, seeking to glorify his God and the history of his nation by inventing a battle that never occurred and a leader who never existed.

The archaeologists who excavated Jericho published their theory. These findings were debated and ultimately accepted by most of the archaeological community. Unless and until some new evidence comes along, the modern science of archaeology has determined that the Israelite conquest of Canaan as described in the book of *Joshua* is not factual. Specifically, Joshua did not fight the battle of Jericho. This is an archaeological "truth," or more accurately, a testing by archaeological research methods of a Biblical story, and the Bible fails the test.

Conservative Biblical scholars disagree, but their objections are tainted, because they are trying to prove the Bible, instead of looking at it objectively—or so the scientists say. Now if religious bias is the problem, perhaps we could demonstrate the objectivity of archaeology in the reconstruction of ancient civilizations by examining a site that has no religious significance today, but one that has been widely excavated by numerous scientists. In such a case, there would be no believers to muddy the waters for the clear-thinking scientists. There are many such sites; perhaps the most famous is Troy.

Searching for Troy

In approximately 800 BC a blind Greek poet named Homer composed the first (and arguably the greatest) poem of European literature: *The Iliad*. This epic work tells of a great war fought approximately 400 years earlier, between a number of Greek city-states and the rich and powerful city of Troy, on the coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Perhaps the reader recalls some of the particulars of this story. Helen, queen of Sparta, was carried off to Troy by Paris, a prince of the Trojan royal family. Outraged, a number of Greek cities combined forces, sailed to Troy, and besieged the city for ten long years. They were not able to breach the massive walls of Troy, so finally they resorted to subterfuge. By means of a giant hollow wooden idol, the famed Trojan horse, the Greeks infiltrated Troy. The gates were thrown open, and the city was lost. Those Trojans not killed were enslaved, and Troy itself was burned and demolished. The victorious Greeks sailed home with the beautiful Helen, the cause of it all, "the face that launched a thousand ships."

Since Roman times scholars have debated *The Iliad*: Does it describe a real war, or is it just a myth? If there was such a war, how accurate is Homer's telling of it? In the 1850s, modern archeology took up the debate. For the last 140 years team after team of scientists has excavated a now deserted site on the coast of Turkey. Their very impressive and voluminous findings were reviewed by a recent documentary series on public television, *In Search of the Trojan War*. According to this program, the site suspected to contain the ruins of Troy was continuously occupied by humans for over 5,000 years. It contains 50 separate

levels. Nine of these levels show the characteristics of true cities, that is, walls, palaces, *etc.* Nine of the levels also show signs of violent destruction, either by warfare or natural disaster, such as earthquakes.

What of Homer's Troy? Which level, if any, matches the magnificent city of *The Iliad*? Did the Trojan War really happen? Almost a century and a half of modern scientific investigation, without any religious interference or bias, has yielded a new answer for each new investigator. The archaeological "truth" about Troy changes with each generation of archaeologists. The original excavator "proved" that *The Iliad* was as accurate as Christians believe the Bible to be. A later archaeological team threw out most of his conclusions and "proved" that Homer exaggerated greatly, if he told the truth at all. A subsequent generation of diggers "proved" that an earthquake largely destroyed Troy, and that pirates finished the job. And so on. The only points on which all the experts agree are that the site was inhabited for thousands of years, and it is now abandoned. But what of the sophisticated techniques for dating artifacts and levels of occupation? Each artifact was precisely catalogued by the team that found it. Each highly trained archaeologist looked at those catalogued findings, possibly made some excavations of his own, and then came up with a different interpretation to explain how all those artifacts got there.

The narrator of the documentary series takes us through these diverse theories in six hours of analysis. At the end, he makes this startling observation on the archaeological search for truth about the Trojan war: "*There can never be a final word, only a new interpretation by each*

generation in terms of its own dreams and needs.” This is the “proof,” the “knowledge,” and the “truth” that modern archaeology gives us: “... never a final word, only a new interpretation....”

Ever Learning...Never Able...

Returning to archaeological excavations in the lands of the Bible, let us review the case of Joshua and the battle of Jericho. The current secular view is that no battle took place there, and no walls existed. The proof is in the pottery, so to speak. But the final archaeological word is not in, and it never will come in. This is not the conclusion of a religious fanatic defending Scripture; this is a limitation of the method of the science of archaeology, as demonstrated in the search for Troy.

The skeptic may think that we are playing with words in reaching this conclusion. Perhaps he would say that the present theory of “no walls at Jericho” is *substantially* true, and that later excavations in the area will “fine tune” it. The skeptic would be wrong. In archaeology any theory, no matter how well established, can be turned on its head by the next shovelful of dirt at the next dig. The *Time* article provides us with just such an example.

Many secular archaeologists questioned the existence of King David, because there are no records of him dating from the time of his rule (traditional dates 1025-985 BC). As with Joshua and the conquest of Canaan, these scientists speculate that the legend of David may have been added by a scribe recopying documents at a much later date, trying to “improve” the history of Israel. But in modern Israel in 1993 an inscription in stone dating from about 900 BC was found containing the phrases “House of

David,” and “King of Israel.” That one inscription was enough to turn skeptical opinion around: Now archaeologists generally accept that David really existed.

A monument and inscription from 1200 BC commemorating Joshua’s victory at the mighty walls of Jericho would similarly turn the archaeological world’s theory of the Hebrew conquest of Canaan on its head. Does such a monument exist? Who can say? But it is certainly true that the archaeological “truth” about Joshua and Jericho will not be the same fifty years from now as it is today, or as it was fifty years ago.

The reader may question the phrasing in saying that the truth of a past event is going to change every fifty years. How does the truth of the past change? Obviously, it never does. We have an account in writing of Joshua and the Israelites conquering the walled city of Jericho. Now that event either took place or it did not take place. The same can be said for any event for which we have record. The Greeks sailed to Troy to get Helen, or they did not. The theorizing of modern day archaeologists does not change a jot or tittle of history, because it is already past; it is out of their grasp; they can never re-live or recall those events. Even if an archaeologist constructed a hypothesis that was absolutely accurate in explaining the Trojan War or Joshua and the battle of Jericho, no one could ever know it was absolutely accurate, because no one can go back in time and test the hypothesis against reality.

This may all seem very basic, but it demonstrates that archaeological research fails to give us historical truth not just occasionally, but consistently. No hypothesis of history

based upon archaeological research has ever or can ever be shown to be true. The theories will continue to pour out of the minds of archaeologists, but none of them will ever be proved either. Naturally this conclusion includes written records also. We do not know if those indestructible clay tablets of the Assyrians or Hittites are true or not, and we never will. The same can be said for the Egyptian hieroglyphs and even for our friend Homer. He tells a wonderful story, but we will *know* if Achilles and Hector fought outside the walls of golden Troy only when we get a Word from God on the subject.

Biblical Truth

Scientifically, we do not know if the Bible is true, and we never will. That, of course, does not derogate from the truth or authority of Scripture, for two reasons: Scripture is self-authenticating; and science cannot prove anything true.

Scripture teaches that from eternity past God predetermined everything, everyone, every action, and every moment. By His Spirit and His Word He executed His eternal plan and brought the universe and time itself into existence. Since He is Creator of all, including time, He stands outside of it and is therefore unchanging. When He inspired the prophets and apostles to write down that portion of His eternal plan which He chose to reveal to us, He directed them to write His *unchanging* Word describing His *unchanging* plan. When it comes to the past, how could anyone possibly imagine a more authoritative history than the Word of the One Who determined that history and then brought it to pass?

Revisiting Joshua and Jericho one last time, let us pose the same question to the Biblical narrative that we did to the archaeological theory. How do we know that the Scriptural account of the battle of Jericho is true? Because the Bible says so. No hypotheses here, no guesses, just truth, from the God of truth, who not only infallibly knows the events at Jericho, but also predetermined them and brought them to pass. To doubt the veracity of any historical event in Scripture is to doubt the very nature of God Himself.

The “moderate majority” will discount the previous argument as an evasion, circular reasoning, irrationalism, and double-talk. It is simply wrong, say they, to believe that the Bible speaks truthfully on historical matters because it says it does. The Bible itself must be checked, or “verified.” But by what can Scripture be corrected? What is the standard the moderates use to judge the Bible? Archeological methods of research can provide us with mountains of information about—or at least mountains of—pottery and spears used in ancient Israel, and we should respect that information, and the scientists who work so diligently to extract and study the artifacts they find. But any theory they devise concerning any part of Biblical history is by the nature of their own inductive method tentative and inconclusive. One cannot verify any narrative with a worse theory. The “moderate majority” cannot legitimately test Biblical history with scientific methodology, and since there currently are no other possibilities with which to verify it, they must either receive the Scriptural narrative in faith or reject it for no good reason.

The reader may wonder why this discussion of archaeology and the Bible has been limited to the Old Testament, and why the subject of miracles has not been considered more extensively. Aside from time and space constraints, there are two main reasons: The New Testament manuscripts are now generally accepted, even among skeptics. (A few generations ago they were not accepted as genuine, but someone came up with a new theory and now they are.) The skeptics do not believe what the manuscripts say, but they do, at least for the moment, accept them as dating from the apostolic age. Second, archaeological methods of research cannot give us a true theory of any event that is *not* a miracle. Given that failure, how can archaeologists even begin to comment with any credibility upon Bible history that contains many miracles, such as the Gospels?

"Fact vs. Faith"

The notion of "fact vs. faith," as *Time* put it, now can be seen in all of its absurdity. To test any Scriptural historical account by means of any theory of archaeology is to test that which cannot be false by means of that which cannot be true. It is the height of absurdity.

The Bible is the only means by which God reveals His plan of redemption to His people. As such, it is primarily concerned with spiritual matters, and when we read it we should also be primarily concerned with the spiritual knowledge it contains. But the great drama of redemption is being played out upon the stage of the visible universe and history. We cannot fully appreciate the scope and grandeur of God's plan of salvation if we neglect the platform upon which it is presented. We must not take lightly the denial

of the accuracy of Biblical history by modern archaeology. If we do not proclaim the truth about Joshua and Jericho and King David or any other historical narrative in Scripture, we are guilty of not proclaiming "the whole counsel of God." We are in a battle for truth, and we must look to God for patience and courage to see our way through it.

When the youthful David visited his brothers on the battlefield, he heard Goliath taunting Israel. He was outraged, asking, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26). David immediately volunteered to face Goliath in combat, and he slew that blasphemer.

David had to battle the enemies of Israel militarily. Our war with the enemies of Christ is spiritual and intellectual in nature, but it is just as real, and even more deadly. As Christians our posture should be one of righteous indignation against the giant of skeptical archaeology that slurs the truth of the Word of Almighty God. Who are these archaeologists who think they can disprove Scripture with a piece of broken pottery dug out of the mud? Who are the "moderate majority" who dare tell us what parts of the Bible are "reasonable" to believe? Let us be as eager to confront the giant of archeology as David was to confront the Philistine champion. In the struggle between the eternal Word of God and secular theories, we know by revelation that God will crush all anti-Christian arguments and imaginations under our feet. "Is not my word like fire?" says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Jeremiah 23:29.