



Eric H. Cline

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A Very Short Introduction

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## Biblical Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction

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would 'prove' the Bible. He surveys some of the sites, including Hazor,  
Megiddo, Gezer, Lachish, Masada, and Jerusalem. Separate chapters deal with  
the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, frauds and forgeries, and future  
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*To my family and my fellow archaeologists*



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# Introduction

The field of biblical archaeology is flourishing today, with popular interest at an all-time high. Millions of viewers watch television documentaries on the Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, and the so-called Lost Tomb of Jesus. Major publishing houses have published competing Bible atlases, and the popularizing magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* reaches a large audience. And every year at Easter, Charlton Heston appears on television as Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie *The Ten Commandments*, raising his arms high to part the waters of the Red Sea so that the Hebrews may cross to safety.

Biblical archaeology is a subset of the larger field of Syro-Palestinian archaeology—which is conducted throughout the region encompassed by modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Specifically, it is archaeology that sheds light on the stories, descriptions, and discussions in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament from the early second millennium BCE, the time of Abraham and the Patriarchs, through the Roman period in the early first millennium CE.

Despite the fact that biblical archaeologists began their excavations in the Holy Land more than a hundred years ago—with a Bible in one hand and a trowel in the other—major questions still remain



1. Israel and Judah from 930 to 720 BCE.

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unanswered, including whether there was really an exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt and the extent of David and Solomon's empires. Other unresolved issues involve the specific details of daily life during the period of the Divided Kingdoms, after the time of Solomon, and the difference between Canaanite and Israelite material culture during the Early Iron Age.

Most biblical archaeologists do not deliberately set out to either prove or disprove elements of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament through archaeology. Instead, they investigate the material culture of the lands and time periods mentioned in the Bible, and the people, places, and events discussed in those ancient texts, in order to bring them to life and to reconstruct the culture and history of the region. This is particularly evident in New Testament archaeology, where the excavation of cities like Caesarea, Capernaum, and Sepphoris has shed light on the social, religious, and geographic situation in the time before, during, and after the life of Jesus.

However, biblical archaeology has generally provided more relevant information that can be correlated with the narratives of the Hebrew Bible than with those of the New Testament. There are several reasons for this disparity. The events depicted in the Hebrew Bible occurred over a much longer time period than those depicted in the New Testament—over millennia rather than over approximately two hundred years. Moreover, the stories and events described in the Hebrew Bible occurred throughout a much larger geographic area than those of the New Testament. The entire Middle East and North Africa provide the backdrop for the stories of the Hebrews, whereas the drama of the early Christians played out mainly in Syro-Palestine and to a lesser extent in ancient Greece and Italy.

For these two reasons of space and time, there are many more potentially relevant Old Testament archaeological sites than New Testament sites. Perhaps of equal importance is the fact



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that the Hebrew Bible often describes events such as battles and destructions, and solid structures such as buildings and inscriptions carved in stone. These leave behind physical remnants that tend to endure for long periods of time, whereas the narratives of the New Testament more often involved language and ideas that have enormous social impact but leave few physical artifacts that can be discovered by digging. Nonetheless, biblical archaeology has provided wonderful insights into both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, and correlations with both (see table 1, page 6).

For many scholars, the Bible is an important source of data that helps to shed light on ancient life and practices. Leaving aside for the moment the religious significance and the questions of the historical accuracy of the text, there is no question that the Bible is a historical document of seminal importance. It is an ancient source that often contains abundant details and descriptions of the Holy Land in antiquity. It is a source that can be used—with caution—to shed light on the ancient world, just as Syro-Palestinian archaeologists use Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, or Neo-Babylonian inscriptions covering the same time period.

This use of ancient sources by biblical archaeologists finds its parallel in the practices of Classical archaeologists who study the texts of the people who lived in ancient Greece and Italy and of New World archaeologists who can now read the texts of the pre-Columbian peoples of the Americas. Classical archaeologists sometimes compare their findings in the field to the Greek and Roman texts, in order to discuss questions such as the nature of the Periclean Building Program or about the plague that ravaged Athens in 430 BCE, while those specializing in the Bronze Age will cautiously use the Homeric texts. In a similar manner, biblical archaeologists often, and with appropriate care, compare their field findings to the biblical account in order to discuss questions concerning David, Solomon, the Divided Kingdoms, and so on.

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What is not always known in advance, however, is the accuracy of the accounts either in the Bible or in the Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, or Neo-Babylonian inscriptions. This problem is not unique to biblical archaeology, for there is considerable variation in the accuracy of the descriptions of ancient Greece and Rome contained in the texts of Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, the Greek playwrights, the Roman authors, and the Roman historians. As classical scholars readily admit, some texts are more accurate than others. Not all can be used to verify data obtained from field excavations in the Aegean and western Mediterranean.

It is in the question of the historical accuracy of the texts where the interests of professional biblical archaeologists and the educated public overlap, for it is frequently the quintessential biblical questions—the ones that fueled the birth of the field—that still intrigue the public. Did Joshua capture Jericho? Was there someone named Abraham who wandered from Mesopotamia to Canaan? Did David and Solomon exist? Where was Jesus buried? Although biblical archaeology today is a far cry from what it was a hundred or more years ago—it is now more scientifically rigorous, and its practitioners have generally moved on to more anthropologically oriented topics—these basic questions still resonate. Unfortunately, answering them is not always easy.

**Table 1. Concordance of Archaeological Data and the Biblical Accounts**

<b>Archaeological Finding</b>	<b>Approximate Dating</b>	<b>Biblical Account(s)</b>	<b>Concordance</b>
Excavation of Jericho	1550 BCE	Joshua at Jericho	No
A “destruction layer” at the site of Hazor in modern Israel.	13th century BCE	Israelites burned the city of Hazor during their conquest of Canaan.	Uncertain
9 The Israel Stele—a textual mention of Israel outside of the Bible.	1207 BCE	Multiple descriptions of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible.	Yes
Structures at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer attributed to Solomon or later kings.	10th or 9th century BCE	1 Kings 9:15: King Solomon levied to build . . . (at) Hazor and Megiddo and Gezer.	Uncertain
Inscription of Pharaoh Sheshonq at Karnak in Egypt and fragment of stele found at Megiddo.	925 BCE	1 Kings 14.25: Attack of Pharaoh Shishak on Judah and Jerusalem.	Probable

The Mesha Inscription, discovered at Dibon in Jordan, naming Omri.	9th century BCE	Multiple mentions of an Israelite king called Omri in the Hebrew Bible.	Yes
Monolith Inscription of Neo-Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, naming Ahab among others.	853 BCE	Multiple mentions of an Israelite king called Ahab in the Hebrew Bible.	Yes
7 Black Obelisk of Neo-Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, naming and depicting Jehu.	841 BCE	Multiple mentions of an Israelite king called Jehu in the Hebrew Bible.	Yes
Tel Dan Stele in Northern Israel, naming the "House of David."	9th century BCE	Multiple mentions of David, King of United Monarchy in the Hebrew Bible.	Yes
Archaeological finds at Lachish in Israel and the site of Nineveh in Iraq.	8th century BCE	2 Kings 18:13: Neo-Assyrian King Sennacherib attacks the fortified cities of Judah.	Yes

**Table 1. (Continued)**

<b>Archaeological Finding</b>	<b>Approximate Dating</b>	<b>Biblical Account(s)</b>	<b>Concordance</b>
Siloam Inscription in "Hezekiah's Tunnel" in Jerusalem.	8th century BCE	2 Kings 20:20: preparations made by King Hezekiah of Judah against the coming attack by Sennacherib and the Neo-Assyrians in 701 BCE.	Yes
Tel Migne/Ekron Inscription.	Early 7th century BCE	Ekron, a Philistine city mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.	Yes
Evidence of destruction of Jerusalem, complete with Neo-Babylonian arrowheads.	597 and 586 BCE	2 Kings 24–25; 2 Chronicles 36; Jeremiah 39, 52; and Ezekiel 4: destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonians.	Yes
Fecal analysis of ancient toilets reveals the diet and parasites of inhabitants subjected to a prolonged siege.	586 BCE	Lamentations 2:20, 4:4, 4:10; Ezekiel 5:10–17: relating to the Neo-Babylonian siege of Judean cities.	Yes
Silver Amulet Scrolls found in the Hinnom Valley in Jerusalem	6th century BCE	Numbers 6:24–26: relating to priestly blessings.	Yes

Dead Sea Scrolls.	3rd century BCE–1st century CE	Contain all books of the Hebrew Bible with the exception of the Book of Esther.	Yes
Temple Mount platform expanded by Herod the Great.	1st century BCE	Matthew 21:12–14: Jesus overturns tables of money-changers in Temple.	Yes
Galilee Boat found on the lakebed of a drought-stricken Sea of Galilee.	1st century BCE–1st century CE	Descriptions of Jesus and followers at Lake Tiberias in the New Testament.	Yes
Inscription mentioning Pontius Pilate, found at Caesarea in modern Israel.	30 CE	Multiple mentions of Pontius Pilate in the New Testament.	Yes
Ossuary of Caiaphas.	1st century CE	John 11:49–53; 18:14: several mentions of Caiaphas, the high priest of the Hebrews at the time of the crucifixion, in the New Testament.	Possible
Megiddo Prison mosaic, with inscription naming Jesus Christ.	3rd century CE	Multiple mentions of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.	Yes

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Part I

**The evolution of the  
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