

**THE CASE FOR**

# Biblical Archaeology

Uncovering the Historical Record  
of God's Old Testament People



**JOHN D. CURRID**

Foreword by David W. Chapman

“In his *The Case for Biblical Archaeology: Uncovering the Historical Record of God’s Old Testament People*, John D. Currid provides a thorough and readable introduction to the discipline of archaeology and its impact on the study of the Old Testament.

“The work is divided into three parts. The first part comprises chapters that cover a general introduction to the geography and topography of the land of the Bible, a general introduction to the history of the field of archaeology as it relates to the ancient Near East, the nature of biblical tells and their excavation, and a brief survey of the history of the lands of the Bible from the earliest times about which archaeology can provide information to the beginning of the Babylonian exile.

“The second part explores the land of biblical Israel in more detail, with separate chapters on each of the main geographical regions of Palestine that treat their most important archaeological sites. The third major part of the book provides the reader with an overview of the results of archaeology as they relate to some key features of the culture of Israel in the Old Testament period. These chapters are particularly valuable because they provide concise but readable overviews of a number of topics, such as agriculture and burial practices, about which good introductory treatments are hard to come by.

“Several features of the book make it especially well suited for use as a textbook for an introductory course on biblical archaeology or a seminary-level general introductory course to the Old Testament. The main text is supplemented by several appendices that provide historical and chronological information and a glossary of terms used in archaeological literature. Among the appendices is a summary of extrabiblical references to the kings of Israel and Judah that both students and teachers of the Bible will find helpful in setting the biblical accounts in their proper historical context. In addition, most sections conclude with a list of key terms, a number of discussion questions, and suggestions for further reading that will enable students to pursue more in-depth study of topics of interest, and that teachers can use as the basis of additional assignments as needed.

“In its breadth, its readability, and its organization, *The Case for Biblical Archaeology* provides a valuable resource to pastors, teachers, and students who would like to learn about the real world of biblical archaeology and the myriad ways that it has cast light on our understanding of the world of the Bible in the Old Testament period.”

—**David L. Adams**, Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology (Old Testament), Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

“In some respects, this book is a needed update to Dr. Currid’s *Doing Archaeology in the Land of the Bible*, which is now twenty years old. Yet it’s much more

than an update. Currid not only discusses the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the work of archaeology in Bible lands, but describes in detail the geographic attributes of each region and provides appendices that include timelines, king lists, and extrabiblical references to biblical personages, as well as crucial discussions on aspects of society (agriculture, burial practices, and water management).

“This book is a must for all serious Bible students, whether they plan to excavate in Israel or to work from their ‘armchairs.’ Dr. Currid is to be applauded for creating such a manual. It is hard to imagine anyone with more experience and knowledge of biblical archaeology. Thus, the book is not only helpful to the beginning student, but also highly authoritative, written by someone who has ‘dirtied his boots’ in the field. I cannot imagine teaching a course on ancient Israel without referring to this resource often. Furthermore, I cannot imagine a beginning excavator who did not have this book in his or her backpack while in the field. In fact, in my upcoming Study Abroad experience in Israel and Jordan, I plan to have this book in hand!”

—**Mark W. Chavalas**, Professor of History, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

“While many such introductory studies use either an archaeological or a biblical approach, Currid’s geographical approach is fresh and helpful as an introduction to the subject for a beginning student, layperson, or traveler to the Holy Land. His view of the role of archaeology in the study of the Bible is exactly right. His key terms, discussion questions, and suggestions for further reading at the conclusion of chapters extend the volume’s usefulness. Part 2 could even be used as a travel guide for a first-time visitor. The only thing missing is a chapter on Transjordan. The appendices, too, add value. Altogether, this volume stands out from the competition.”

—**Lawrence T. Geraty**, President Emeritus, La Sierra University;  
former president, American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR);  
longtime director, Madaba Plains Project (Jordan)

“In this book John Currid provides the reader with a wonderful introduction to important geographical, historical, and cultural aspects of the Bible. Readers will benefit from the archaeological and textual knowledge found here.”

—**Richard S. Hess**, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and  
Editor, *Denver Journal*, Denver Theological Seminary

“Over the years, I have asked my students to use John Currid’s easy-to-read book *Doing Archaeology in the Land of the Bible*, and also encouraged tour members to purchase his book in preparation for the Israel tours I have led. I was delighted to see Currid’s new manuscript, *The Case for Biblical*

*Archaeology: Uncovering the Historical Record of God's Old Testament People*, a book well suited to the classroom and a guide to the layperson interested in archaeology. His inclusion of discussion questions and specific reading suggestions for the various chapters will be helpful for further study. Currid's new work is well organized and leads the reader from the broader areas of the history and work of archaeology in the Holy Land, to specific consideration of archaeological work in the various regions of the land, and finally to important factors relating to life in ancient Israel. Currid's new work will be welcomed among those of us who desire a clear presentation of the geography, archaeology, and everyday life in the land of the Bible. I strongly recommend his new book."

—**H. Wayne House**, Distinguished Research Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, Faith International University and Faith Seminary

"*The Case for Biblical Archaeology* provides an excellent entry point into the archaeology of Israel and the ancient Near East. Unlike other books of this type, its organization by topic, rather than by archaeological era, makes it especially useful. Currid's masterful summaries of burial practices, ceramics, architecture, etc. from the Neolithic through the Iron Ages open 'the fifth gospel' to his readers and will leave them longing to traverse these lands for themselves."

—**Catherine McDowell**, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"Currid provides an accessible handbook for an excavation volunteer or a traveler to Israel. This book provides an introduction to archaeology in the Holy Land, as well as a robust guide to the tourist or pilgrim who wants an understanding of the role that archaeology plays in revealing the history of the region. This handbook explains how the archaeological enterprise has transformed our understanding of the land of Israel. It is a valuable reference for archaeology students going on their first dig, tourists on a pilgrimage tour, pastors, or tour leaders."

—**Steven M. Ortiz**, Professor of Archaeology and Biblical Backgrounds, School of Theology, and Director, Charles D. Tandy Institute of Archaeology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

"In this excellent work, John Currid starts by giving readers what the title promises—an explanation of how to practice archaeology in the land of the Bible. He also then takes readers on a tour of that land and explains numer-

ous important facets of the biblical culture. Currid's work obviously flows from the mind and heart of a person who well understands the discipline of archaeology and related fields, drawing from decades of excavation and study and ministry."

—**Boyd Seavers**, Professor of Old Testament Studies, University of Northwestern—St. Paul, Minnesota

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JOHN D. CURRID

  
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To my students (1980–2020)



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# Foreword

**T**HERE ARE COUNTLESS reasons to delve into archaeology. Many people love studying archaeology for its own sake. The thrill of discovery and the immense quantities of new historical data are enough to keep us hooked. Perhaps we were lured in years ago by visiting museum exhibitions of exquisite golden artifacts from Mesopotamian Ur or from the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs such as King Tut. Others of us grew up digging in our backyards, with childhood dreams of unearthing a relic from years past, thrilling to the discovery of an old soda bottle or a bovine shoulder bone. Some of us remember watching Indiana Jones movies, only later to learn that only rarely does the modern archaeologist need to fend off Nazis, murderous religious sects, and space aliens with a whip and brash resolve. No, excavation is a much slower and more mundane process that involves methodically taking 4-meter squares of soil down centimeter by centimeter with a brush and a hand trowel. Whatever has led us to love archaeology, a book about excavating in biblical lands is right up our alley.

Others come to archaeology hoping to substantiate treasured historical documents, perhaps seeking evidence to corroborate biblical history. This has long motivated people to dig in sites such as Troy (to validate Homer), to pursue evidence for the route of Alexander the Great through the Near East, and to study Egyptian hieroglyphs on tomb walls in hopes of discovering a lost pharaoh. Bible students are by no means alone in such interests, even if we may have extra motivation to assert the historical validity of our holy text. But we may acknowledge a cautionary tale in Heinrich Schliemann's nineteenth-century race to uncover Homer's Troy at Hissarlik in Turkey. Schliemann plowed through layers of archaeological material, taking relatively few notes and destroying millennia of evidence. He then overhyped his findings and ultimately misidentified the correct historical strata for the Homeric city. In the quest to validate written sources, it is certainly possible to be too hasty in making identifications and to be unprofessional in archaeological procedure. Similarly, biblical archaeology has made mistakes in the past, even amid a vast quantity of careful research and many truly important discoveries. What is needed is a trustworthy guide to help us



weigh the evidence cautiously and confidently. In John Currid's book, you possess just such a reliable volume.

Finally, still others realize that perhaps the greatest value from archaeology for biblical studies stems from how excavations illuminate ancient culture, facilitating better interpretations of the biblical text. While relatively few artifacts exposed in a dig speak directly to the historicity of the Bible, every archaeological discovery informs us a little bit more about ancient culture and about life in Bible times. This is important because it relates to how we humans converse with one another. We are constantly relying on our shared experiences of culture to fill in the gaps in our speech. Communication is as much about what we do *not* say as about what we say. As we recount events from our lives, there are many things that we do not have to verbalize because they are implicitly known to everyone in our society, and so we omit such matters from our speech and writing.

For example, I can declare: "Last night my wife and I hired a babysitter, and we went to a movie." Presumably that makes good sense to you. Now imagine an audience of people who have not yet fallen under the sway of Western pop-culture hegemony—perhaps they live deep in a beautiful rainforest or high up in a remote mountain village; these folks might have never seen a movie theater and may well have different customs surrounding child-rearing. Would my sentence make sense to them? They would undoubtedly have many questions, such as: "What is a babysitter? How do you hire babysitters, and what do you use to pay them? What is a movie? Why did you have to hire a babysitter in order to go to the movie? Where did you see this movie? How did you get there? Why did you do this at night? Was this for fun or for work?" In short, why is it that some may have difficulty understanding my sentence, while the rest of us comprehend it immediately? Those who grasp the meaning also typically share the same culture. In my sentence, I had intentionally omitted details that I assumed my reader would know based on shared culture, but in the process my sentence might well confuse someone who has not experienced life in twenty-first-century America.

Consequently, when we read the Old Testament, which is culturally removed from us by more than twenty-five hundred years, there could be entire portions that mystify us or that we misinterpret simply because we do not comprehend the societal assumptions that the original authors shared with the people of their day. Thus, any student of the Bible (or of any other ancient book, for that matter) can hone his or her ability to interpret the text by getting to know the cultures of antiquity. This immediately propels us into the arms of archaeologists, for the main data that we have about those ancient Old Testament societies must come to us from digging in the dirt.

John Currid helpfully observes throughout this fine volume that we

discover firsthand evidence in archaeology of everything from ancient burial practices to the daily stuff of life. We encounter inscriptions, ostraca, and papyri that have provided the vast bulk of our knowledge of ancient literature. We observe the layout of Bronze and Iron Age buildings—from houses to storerooms, water tunnels to city gates, temples to palaces. We also get marvelous glimpses into what such structures contained. We witness the very idols and shrines of the surrounding ancient Near Eastern nations, which served as such a great temptation to the Israelites. And we learn about patterns of everyday life in food, agriculture, family life, construction, ceramics, jewelry, transport, warfare, scribal practices, and so on.

Whatever motivates your interest in archaeology and in the Bible, this book serves as a masterly introduction to the field. Currid draws on decades of experience as a field archaeologist, and his excellent training is evident on every page. You will quickly recognize that John is summarizing meticulous research from his previous books on biblical geography, Egyptology, and the study of the ancient Near East. Moreover, his extensive experience in writing accessible academic commentaries on (by current count) at least nine Old Testament books means that Professor Currid is eminently suited to make good and proper connections between the biblical text and archaeological discovery. John's years of seminary teaching and pastoral ministry have also equipped him to communicate even the most technical matters in ways that all of us can understand and enjoy. As John leads you through the many Old Testament locales and as he takes you, discovery by discovery, through ancient buildings and artifacts, you can read with the confidence that you are learning from a pro.

David W. Chapman  
Professor of New Testament and Archaeology  
Covenant Theological Seminary



# Preface

AS THE SUBTITLE of this book indicates, it is an introduction, meant to be a mere door into the field of archaeology during the Old Testament period. By nature, it is selective and not exhaustive. Although it is introductory, I have included much bibliography throughout, so that the student who desires more in-depth study may easily pursue it. In a nutshell, my goal is to provide an initial overview of the main areas of inquiry, discovery, and study of archaeology as it relates to the Hebrew Bible.

Many introductions to the archaeology of Old Testament times survey the material remains according to the sequence of archaeological periods. So one chapter covers the remains of the Early Bronze Age, and then the next chapter gives an overview of the Middle Bronze Age, and so forth in chronological fashion. This is a good and valuable approach to the topic. I have taken a somewhat different tack by providing an overview of the material topically and chronologically. For example, I survey the burial practices in Canaan from the Neolithic period to the end of the Iron II period. This approach to the archaeological finds in the Old Testament time period will perhaps be helpful.

It is hard to believe that I have been working in the field of archaeology and in the “field” of excavation for almost fifty years. I began my study as an undergraduate student when I attended the field school of Tell Qasile, under the direction of Ami Mazar, in 1972. That spurred a lifelong interest in archaeology and how it illumines our understanding of the Old Testament. More in-depth training came when I served as a field supervisor at the excavation of Carthage in Tunisia under the oversight of Larry Stager. At that time, Professor Stager was teaching at the University of Chicago, and he served as my PhD dissertation supervisor. Later staff positions at Tell el-Hesi, Bethsaida, and Lahav added to the training. I am deeply indebted to all those who trained me in excavation methodology over the years.

I have written this introduction with my students in mind, both past and present. Over my many years of teaching archaeology to both undergraduate and graduate students in Israel and in the US, I have learned as much from them as they have learned from me. Therefore, this book is dedicated to them.



# Abbreviations

AASOR	<i>Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. David Noel Freedman (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992)
ABR	Associates for Biblical Research
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)
APEF	<i>Annual of the Palestine Exploration Fund</i>
ASOR	American School of Oriental Research
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975)
EAEHL	<i>Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> , ed. Michael Avi-Yonah, 4 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Masada Press, 1975–78)
EB	Early Bronze (Age)
EI	<i>Eretz Israel</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition</i> , ed. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner,

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	and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001)
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JPOS</i>	<i>Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LB	Late Bronze (Age)
MB	Middle Bronze (Age)
<i>NEA</i>	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i> (formerly <i>Biblical Archaeologist</i> )
<i>NEAEHL</i>	<i>The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> , ed. Ephraim Stern, 5 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993–2008)
PEF	Palestine Exploration Fund
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PN	Pottery Neolithic (period)
PPN	Pre-Pottery Neolithic (period)
PPNA	Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (period)
PPNB	Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (period)
PPNC	Pre-Pottery Neolithic C (period)
TA	<i>Tel Aviv</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTS	<i>Vetus Testamentum, Supplements</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

*“O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old.” (Psalm 44:1)*

**B**ARGIL PIXNER MADE the following statement regarding the land of the Bible: “Five gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and the one you will find in the land they call holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you.”<sup>1</sup> Pixner was probably quoting Jerome, who, in the fourth century A.D., was the first commentator to call the land of the Bible “the fifth gospel.” He believed that the geography, topography, and site remains add a new dimension to one’s understanding of the Bible. In the preface to his work on Chronicles, Jerome states, “Just as Greek history becomes more intelligible to those who have seen Athens . . . man will get a clearer grasp of Holy Scripture who has gazed at Judaea with his own eyes and has got to know the memorials of its cities and the names . . . of the various localities.”<sup>2</sup> Jerome is absolutely correct. The Old Testament scholar George Adam Smith (1856–1942), who served as the principal at the University of Aberdeen, agreed with Jerome when he poignantly said at the end of the nineteenth century that the land is “a museum full of living as well as ancient specimens of its subjects.”<sup>3</sup>

But, specifically, in what ways does a study of the land of the Bible give us greater understanding of the Bible itself? A primary purpose of archaeology and its related disciplines is to shed light on the historical and material contexts in which the events narrated in the Bible occurred. Archaeology helps to provide a life setting for biblical texts, that is, a *Sitz im Leben*. In that respect, archaeology can be a confirmatory tool, especially when the textual and archaeological evidence converge. A good example of how archaeology illumines the Bible is the conquest of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, king of

1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee according to the Fifth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), back cover.

2. J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 120.

3. George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 16th ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 40.



Babylon, during the decade of the 580s B.C. During the early years of the sixth century B.C., Judah came under the control of the Babylonians and, in fact, the Babylonians set up the Judean Zedekiah as a puppet king over Judah and Jerusalem (597–586 B.C.). Toward the end of Zedekiah's reign, the Egyptians began to flex their muscles in Syro-Palestine. Zedekiah, believing the Egyptians would come to his aid, revolted against the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar responded quickly. He captured the outlying fortresses of Judah and then conquered Jerusalem after a siege that lasted a little more than a year. The conquest of Judah and Jerusalem is described in detail in 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36.

Most of the cities of Judah from this period that have been excavated contain destruction layers from the Babylonian invasion. Major sites, such as Beth Shemesh, Gezer, and Lachish have huge burn layers that reflect

the devastation. Excavations at Lachish in the 1930s under the supervision of J. L. Starkey uncovered eighteen ostraca in the burnt debris of a guard-room between the inner and outer gates of the city.<sup>4</sup> The date of the ostraca, based upon stratigraphical analysis, is commonly understood to be just prior to the destruction of Lachish at the hands of the Babylonians. A military leader named Hoshaiiah wrote some of the letters to another commander named Yaosh. A common scholarly reading of the texts understands Yaosh to be the commander of Lachish, and Hoshaiiah, in charge of a



Fig. 1.1. Lachish Ostracum

fortress outside of Lachish, to be writing to him. Others, such as the Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin, in an alternate reading, believe Hoshaiiah to be the commander of Lachish, writing to Yaosh, who was a high official in Jerusalem.

One of the letters closes with Hoshaiiah commenting, "And let (my lord) know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah." Hoshaiiah was speaking about fire signals that would have been transmitted from one city of Judah to another, and the particular setting of this letter appears to be the advance of the Babylonian army through the Lachish region. Azekah, located about 12 miles north-northeast of Lachish, was apparently not sending signal fires and, therefore, was perhaps under siege or had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

The destruction layer at Lachish from the Babylonian attack has been exposed through archaeological investigation. Many scholars agree that the

4. Ostraca (*sing.* ostracum) are pottery sherds containing inscriptions written in ink.

ash layer of Level II at the site reflects the attack of Nebuchadnezzar. The city gate was destroyed at this time, and its ash layer seals the occupation layer beneath it; that occupation layer contains the Lachish ostraca and Late Judean pottery. One of the letters embedded in the destruction debris opens with a date, “In the ninth [year] . . .” This date should bring to mind 2 Kings 25:1, which says, “And in the ninth year of his reign [i.e., Zedekiah], in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it.”

All the data—biblical, archaeological, and linguistic—come together to provide an accurate and helpful picture of what happened at Lachish during the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians. Archaeological investigation provides background material and some substance to the events described by the prophet Jeremiah: “Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah, for those were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained” (34:6–7). This convergence of the biblical text and archaeology is not unique. The biblical authors set events like the invasions of Pharaoh Shishak (1 Kings 14:24–26) and Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13; 19:16; 2 Chron. 32:1–22) and the revolt of Mesha, king of Moab, against Israel in their proper chronological framework and setting.<sup>5</sup> These events are confirmed and filled out by contemporary ancient Near Eastern texts, specifically the Bubastite Portal at the Temple of Amun at Karnak, the Prism of Sennacherib, and the Moabite Stone. Excavation work has also brought to light numerous destruction layers in Israel that reflect these campaigns.

It is our contention that the purpose of archaeology (and related fields) is not to prove the Bible. The Bible doesn’t need to be proved. It stands well enough on its own. As Charles Spurgeon once remarked, “Scripture is like a lion. Who ever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose; it will defend itself.” As George Ernest Wright once commented, “Our ultimate aim must not be ‘proof;’ but truth.”<sup>6</sup> Biblical archaeology serves to confirm, illuminate, and give “earthiness” to the Scriptures. It helps to demonstrate that the events related in the biblical accounts actually took place in history. This is especially important in our day and age for two primary reasons. First, the common thinking of our generation is *ahistorical*. That is, for many people, history is irrelevant, is meaningless, and has little application to modern existence. These days, people are obsessed with technological innovation and cultural

5. Source-critical scholars have a difficult time explaining such convergences. It has been reported that at a national meeting of biblical scholars, J. Maxwell Miller asked John Van Seters, who holds to a postexilic date for the writing of Kings, how the author of Kings put Shishak “in the right pew.” Reportedly, Van Seters responded, “I wish I knew.”

6. George E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 27.

change that arrives with lightning speed. There is little interest in history, which is seen as boring and the domain of dusty scholars who are lost in the maze of the past. One cultural critic agonized over this state of affairs by concluding that the Westerner's view and scope of history does not precede breakfast! In reality, the ahistorical worldview is one consequence of post-modernism, post-Christian thinking, and deconstructionism. The dismissal of history is a core part of deconstructionism, in which the modern reader is encouraged to read and interpret the Bible in any way he or she sees fit. The lens of interpretation thus becomes one's own self and experiences. A major argument of deconstructionism is that the reader cannot get at true history because all historical writing is propagandistic and reflects the bias of the historian. Therefore, the question has become, Is there really such a thing as history? Because of the very physical nature of archaeology, its study helps to ground us in the *realia* (i.e., the "real things") of what has happened in the past.

Second, the common thinking of our generation is biblically and historically *uninformed*. A recent Barna survey revealed that at least 12 percent of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife, and another survey indicated that 50 percent of graduating high school seniors thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife! A recent study by Kelton Research concluded that Americans are more familiar with the ingredients of a Big Mac than they are with the Ten Commandments. The uninformed are easy prey to movements such as "pop" archaeology, in which staggering discoveries are announced—the ark of the covenant (with blood still on it!) or Egyptian chariot wheels in the Red Sea—and then the discoverers make careers out of speaking on these so-called finds that have never been produced. Tried and true archaeological research and study fortifies one to resist such bogus claims.

## WHAT IS ARCHAEOLOGY?

Archaeology may be defined as *the systematic study of the material remains of human behavior in the past*. It is concerned with the *realia*, that is, the physical, material remains of antiquity. Roland de Vaux describes it this way: "Archaeology, therefore, is limited to the *realia*, but it studies all the *realia*, from the greatest classical monuments to the locations of prehistoric fireplaces, from art works to small everyday utensils . . . in short, everything which exhibits a trace of the presence or activity of man. Archaeology seeks, describes, and classifies these materials."<sup>7</sup>

The objects of archaeological discovery are in various stages of preservation. Most of the artifacts found are preserved in a ruined or fragile

7. Roland de Vaux, "On Right and Wrong Uses of Archaeology," in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. James A. Sanders (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 65.

condition. That reality highlights Stuart Piggot's famous dictum that archaeology is the "science of rubbish." In contrast to Hollywood's depiction of archaeologists making "the great find" (e.g., the ark of the covenant), the reality is much less exotic. Archaeologists spend their time and efforts in long-forgotten heaps of ancient refuse: shattered pottery, broken small finds, destroyed buildings, and few, if any, crumbling documents. So, for example, archaeologists are excited when they uncover a *midden deposit*, which is an archaeological term for a garbage or trash heap. Middens resulted from deliberate human discarding of trash—food remains, broken pottery, and other domestic materials—into a pile. They contain all kinds of remains that reflect numerous cultural behaviors. These garbage dumps can provide insights into human diet, wealth, status, subsistence patterns, trade, and so forth. Such debris sometimes contains *coprolites*, which are fossilized feces. Examination of coprolites can provide the researcher with the diet of the human and perhaps shed light on prevalent diseases and on what animals might have been domesticated. When all is said and done, Patty Jo Watson hits the nail on the head when she says about archaeologists, "We are all, by definition, middenophiles."<sup>8</sup>

Another example of such remains is the discovery of a *favissa*. This is a pit that has been dug near or in a temple and contains sacred objects no longer in use. For instance, the Fosse Temple at Lachish was destroyed by a violent attack in the thirteenth century B.C. A number of *favissae* were discovered just outside this temple complex, and they contained an abundance of small finds. Amihai Mazar reports, "Among these finds were ivory fragments of a statue, including a palm of a hand and an eye. Presumably, these fragments belonged to a composite statue of a deity made of ivory, wood, and cloth."<sup>9</sup> These discoveries may not be glamorous, but they highlight the reality of archaeological research as "trashology," or "garbology," which deals with what has been thrown away.

## THE AIM OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The primary goal of archaeology is to *discover, observe, preserve, and record the buried remains of antiquity and to use them to help reconstruct ancient life*. It needs to be noted up front, however, that archaeology is by no means exhaustive in what it provides; it is a limited tool. No excavation can paint

8. Patty Jo Watson, "The Idea of Ethnoarchaeology: Notes and Comments," in *Ethnoarchaeology: Implications of Ethnography for Archaeology*, ed. Carol Kramer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 282.

9. Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 254–55.

a complete picture of a site; it gives only a slice of the material remains that exist there. For instance, excavations have taken place at the site of Tell Ras Shamra almost every year since the initial excavation under the direction of Claude Schaeffer in 1929.<sup>10</sup> Great finds have been made there, such as the Ugaritic texts (which are the main source for the Canaanite language). Yet much of the site is unexcavated. That is true of every major site. Megiddo, in northern Israel, has been the subject of the most extensive excavations in the land, beginning in 1903 and continuing almost unabated ever since, yet only part of the mound has been excavated. What archaeology provides for the reconstruction of culture is by nature fragmentary, piecemeal, and incomplete.



Fig. 1.2. Megiddo Excavations

The limitations of archaeology should not be surprising. In Israel, for example, more than 6,000 ancient sites have been surveyed, yet less than 500 have been excavated. Of those, less than 50 have been exposed to major excavation work. These statistics underscore the reality that in the process of reconstructing ancient cultures, archaeology is only part of the equation. It cannot stand on its own. Other disciplines are also valuable and must be brought to bear on this endeavor; fields of study such as anthropology,

10. The only hiatus was during the years surrounding World War II (1939–48). See William M. Schniedewind and Joel H. Hunt, *A Primer on Ugaritic: Language, Culture, and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5–30.

geography, geology, history, and linguistics provide critical keys to unlocking the past. Even with its limitations, however, archaeology is an important investigative tool in the attempt to recover and reconstruct ancient life.

Another example will help to demonstrate the part that archaeology can play in restoring our understanding of ancient life and events, and how it works with other disciplines to achieve that understanding. We read in 2 Chronicles 32 about an Assyrian threat to Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah, near the end of the eighth century B.C. In response to the peril, Hezekiah “closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west side of the city of David” (v. 30). The Gihon Spring was the main and most dependable water source for the city of Jerusalem. It was located, however, outside the city walls near the base of the Ophel (hill). The problem for Jerusalem was that the inhabitants would be cut off from this water source during times of siege or attack. A nineteenth-century explorer named Charles Warren discovered a vertical shaft that was cut through bedrock, allowing the people of Jerusalem to have access to the spring from behind the walls of the city. The Jebusites probably dug it during the Late Bronze Age, and it may have been the shaft that David’s soldiers used to penetrate the city and capture it from the Canaanite inhabitants (2 Sam. 5:6–8). During the time of Hezekiah, the king used part of that old system and then excavated a new tunnel that sloped gently away from the Gihon Spring to allow water to flow into the city of Jerusalem at the Pool of Siloam (2 Chron. 32).

Hezekiah’s tunnel has been found, and we basically know how the tunnel was originally dug because a Hebrew inscription was discovered in the tunnel approximately 20 feet from the entrance to the Siloam Pool. It reads:

[. . . when] (the tunnel) was driven through. And this was the way in which it was cut through: While [. . .] (were) still [. . .] axe(s), each man toward his fellow, and while there were still three cubits to be cut through, [there was heard] the voice of a man calling to his fellow, for there was *an overlap* in the rock on the right [and on the left]. And when the tunnel was driven through, the quarrymen hewed (the rock), each man toward his fellow, axe against axe; and the water flowed from the spring toward the reservoir for 1,200 cubits, and the height of the rock above the head(s) of the quarrymen was 100 cubits.<sup>11</sup>

Two teams moving toward one another, one beginning at the Gihon Spring and the other from the Siloam Pool, cut the tunnel. The tunnel was serpentine because of the change in terrain. The two teams adjusted their paths as they drew near to one another, perhaps being directed by engineers from

11. William F. Albright, “The Siloam Inscription,” in *ANET*, 321.

above. The inscription describes the last moments prior to the meeting of the two teams of cutters.

Information gleaned from various disciplines—archaeology, biblical studies, geography, linguistics, and topography—comes together in order to provide a full picture of the episode of Hezekiah’s construction of a water tunnel at the close of the eighth century B.C. Each discipline provides relevant material for the reconstruction that the other disciplines do not provide. Archaeology is only one of the disciplines that contribute to this multidisciplinary approach to reconstructing ancient life and culture.

### KEY TERMS

archaeology  
 coprolite  
 favissa  
 midden deposit  
 ostrakon (*pl.* ostraca)  
 realia  
*Sitz im Leben*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you argue against the modern Western thought that debunks the significance of history? What role does archaeology play in your argument?
2. Why is it important to see and understand that God revealed the Bible in the contexts of particular historical periods, places, and settings?
3. “Pop archaeology” is a common phenomenon today, in which claims of spectacular finds are used to prove the Bible. How are Christians to respond to such claims?

### FOR FURTHER READING

- Currid, John D. “What Is Archaeology?” in *ESV Archaeology Study Bible*, ed. John D. Currid and David W. Chapman, xix–xx. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.
- Glueck, Nelson. *The Other Side of the Jordan*. Cambridge, MA: ASOR, 1970. For a fascinating discussion of the definition of archaeology and its purposes, see pp. 5–39, “What Is Biblical Archaeology?”
- Wright, George E. *Biblical Archaeology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962. See, especially, pp. 17–28 on the purposes of archaeology.