

ARCHAEOLOGY AND APOLOGETICS:
DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES,
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS
AND
METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES

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The impetus for this research project comes from the author's perusal of various documentary sources on archaeology as a discipline, and his repeated encounter in such sources of the ubiquitous—nearly obligatory—disclaimer, “archaeology cannot prove the Bible.” For example, the erudite Jack P. Lewis had penned a monograph for popular audiences on Archaeology and the Bible in which the predictable refrain is found: “the aim of the Bible is to illuminate the Bible rather than to prove the Bible.”¹ Likewise, the conservative evangelical author Alfred Hoerth disclaims, “Some people mistakenly use archaeology to confirm, authenticate, or prove the bible.”² He then adds, “Even if every historical statement in the Bible could be proven true—confirmed—this would still not prove the theological message of the Bible.”³ To these examples could be added countless more from both the popular level works to the most scholarly tomes in the library on the topic.⁴

But, could not archaeology, at least hypothetically, provide a particular kind of confirmation of some of Scripture's historical truth claims? Apparently, even for Hoerth (who paid lip service to the obligatory disclaimer as noticed above), it really can! Hoerth writes that, yes, archaeology may “*confirm, prove, authenticate and substantiate*.”⁵ One

¹ Jack P. Lewis, *Archaeology and the Bible* (Abilene TX: Biblical Research Press, 1975), vi. Dr. Lewis goes on to explain, “In other words, the interpretation that the Bible gives to history can neither be confirmed nor denied by archaeology” (ibid., 7).

² Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology & the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 18-19.

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ In fact, the honest reader must admit that hardly any standard work on archaeology and the Bible leaves out completely this kind of disclaimer.

⁵ Ibid. Hoerth seems to have missed the point when he states the patently obvious truth, “No archaeological evidence will ever prove the atonement” (ibid.). But, no reputable apologist has ever made

is tempted to reply, “yes, but a rose by any other name....” Perhaps the difference is semantic here, at least for Hoerth. But, in the case of the writings of many other professional archaeologists and Biblicists who are interested in archaeology, the difference is more than semantic.

As the title implies, this paper will explore the boundaries of both archaeology and apologetics as academic disciplines. It will seek to uncover the theoretical foundations that actually underlie these respective fields of study and that form the conceptual framework of various protagonists within each discipline. And, it will suggest a few methodological guidelines for attempting to integrate in an informed manner the more assured results of Biblical archaeology with Biblical apologetics.

LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIALS OF ARCHAEOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

Without doubt, there may have been overzealous advocates of the importance of finds from the field as confirmation of Scripture in the early days of archaeology as an academic discipline. At the risk of sounding snobbish, we might even say that some held a naïve view of the potentials of archaeology for bolstering the historical claims of Scripture. That said, when the limitations and potentials of archaeology as a science are set forth candidly, a picture emerges of a field of study that really does have relevance to the apologetic enterprise.

Subject to revision. Archaeology, unlike the hard sciences, is not a fixed discipline. Archaeology is a “soft” science. Certain limitations inhere in the discipline

any claim of the kind! Hoerth attacks a mere caricature of the apologetic use of archaeology. In his zeal to appear well informed by inclusion of the obligatory disclaimer, he is willing at first to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water. The apologetic use of archaeology is usually much more modest. It would be completely comfortable with the very terms that Hoerth himself prefers, namely, archaeology may possibly “*confirm, prove, authenticate and substantiate.*”

that may not be as problematic for other scientific endeavors. The data frequently shift and are subject to continual revision.

Some results are soon outdated. For instance, one of the criticisms of Joseph Free's immortal volume, *Archaeology and Bible History*, is its "frequent presentation of dated archaeological evidence."¹ This may be a legitimate complaint. New finds can, and have, supplanted earlier conclusions. Academic integrity demands that we accept those that are in fact tested to be true. But, therein lies the rub. Since its data are subject to constant revision, it is not always easy to declare that a given set of archaeological conclusions is now "time tested" or "certain."

Data subject to interpretation. The quest for absolute objectivity may be noble (even if passé for postmoderns), but not easy to attain in the field. Upon admitting this, immediately one may detect the hidden danger of the investigator's prepossessions' possibly precluding his objectivity. Thomas Davis traces the rise and fall of "Biblical Archaeology," and notices that "only when the archaeological data themselves become recognized as dependent on interpretation for their meaning (in other words, no longer seen as purely objective data) did biblical archaeology lose its foundation and collapse."²

Evidently, some Bible expositors and apologists of yesteryear were largely unaware of the role of interpretation in assessing archaeological finds. A tone of intellectual triumphalism sometimes pervaded their works. This ingenuous enthusiasm was unfortunate.

¹ Gary D. Pratico, Review of "*Archaeology and Bible History*, by Joseph P. Free," in *Biblical Archaeologist* (Sep 1994): 183.

² Thomas W. Davis, "Theory and Method in Biblical Archaeology," in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 21.

While archaeology may yet provide authentication for the historic declarations of Scripture, the contemporary apologist must be aware of the indispensable role of interpretation in evaluating the finds. Frankly, it may be more difficult today to set forth a convincing case for the evidentiary role of archaeology for Biblical studies than it was just a generation ago. Merling comments: “The real dilemma, when archaeology and a Bible story do not seem to support each other, is that the archaeological evidence found, as interpreted, does not mesh with the biblical account, as interpreted.”¹

Nonrepeatability of past events. Unlike the hard sciences, archaeology cannot repeat experimentation in order to verify results. In fact, even the sites themselves are often destroyed in excavation.² Furthermore, so few sites that may have an important bearing on biblical history have really been identified, and even fewer sites actually excavated.³ While in many cases *places* and *peoples* may be pegged down accurately, *events* do not so readily yield themselves to archaeological investigation.⁴

Potentials of Archaeology. Despite its limitations, this paper will argue that archaeology does have value for buttressing many of the historic truth claims of the Bible. Manifestly, the empirical data sifted from digs in the Near East do not “prove” the doctrine of the atonement (as Hoerth chided), nor for that matter “prove” the doctrine of

¹ David Merling, “The Relationship between Archaeology and the Bible: Expectations and Reality,” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 40.

² Thus, the oft-repeated dictum, “to excavate is to destroy.”

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ Ibid., 37. Merlin explains, “If anything, excavations of the past tell us that the one area where archaeology is least helpful is with events. Events are usually short-lived and, when described in the Bible, too little detail is provided to be of much help to the archaeologist.” A notorious case concerns the alleged events at Ai during Joshua’s conquest. He writes, “...it should not be forgotten that the ancient event for which evidence is sought is not of some major architectural feature that took years to build, but, as in the case of Ai (Joshua 8), is an event that is presented as occurring in one day, and of what specific deed done we have little knowledge” (ibid., 39).

inspiration (at least not directly).¹ But, these data are vital for testing the statements Scripture may make about past *realia*. Biblical apologist Rubel Shelly has observed,

External evidences can demonstrate the factuality of the Biblical record in the light of various sciences; but this does not of itself prove inspiration. Whereas an inspired book would necessarily be historically and geographically accurate, other books might meet these tests and still be uninspired.²

So, again, while it is agreed that physical finds and their academic interpretations may not be directly capable of demonstrating the veracity of Scripture as Divine revelation, they nevertheless are of relevance for either verifying or falsifying Scripture's descriptions of past places, peoples and events. Thus, to repeat the shopworn disclaimer that "archaeology does not *prove* the Bible" is perhaps merely to attack a straw man, for few if any would suggest that the doctrine of inspiration is a direct corollary to established empirical data.³

CURRENT DEBATE ABOUT "BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY"

As a definition, we quote popular writer Donald Ryan, "To keep things simple, let's just use the term Biblical archaeology to refer to any archaeology that relates to the Bible and its peoples in both the Old and New Testaments."⁴ "Biblical Archaeology" as such has been on the defensive for the past two to three decades. Hoffmeier and Millard

¹ Part of the problem is that the terms "prove," "confirm," "authenticate," etc., are ill-defined in this context. This is really a philosophic debate about the nature and meaning of *evidence* and *proof*. As such, we should be more open to allowing the professional epistemologists to help us with the pertinent definitions. This writer suspects that Biblical apologists are often more fully trained in this aspect of the subject than are their counterparts in Biblical or Syro-Palestinian archaeology. That statement is not meant to be demeaning to archaeologists, but simply a personal observation that seems to hold true in a great number of such verbal disputes about the relationship between archaeology and apologetics.

² Rubel Shelly, *What Shall We Do With The Bible?* (Jonesboro, Ark.: National Christian Press, Inc., 1975), 58.

³ As Shelly indicates, a series of apologetic steps would be needed in order to arrive at the conclusion that the Bible is God's Word by beginning at the point of the archaeological data which dovetail with the Biblical narrative. Yet, that starting point is important and should not be depreciated by sloppily-conceived slogans.

⁴ Donald P. Ryan, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the World of the Bible* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2003), 18.

provide a helpful synopsis of the major conceptual shifts that have taken place in the discipline, a shift usually associated with William Dever at the University of Arizona.

Mazar explains the new trend as, “current archaeological research in Palestine tends to be professional, secular, and free from theological prejudices.”¹ With regard to Dever’s famed call to change the name from “Biblical Archaeology” to “Syro-Palestinian Archaeology,” Mazar maintains,

This suggestion reflects the tendency to abandon the theological approach of traditional biblical archaeology in favor of a secular, professional approach which defines the archaeology of the Levant as a specific branch of world archaeology with its own methods and goals.²

One might partly sympathize with Dever’s dilemma as a professional archaeologist at a state-run university and his desire to give his discipline a new name. Funding issues, grants, even ethical/legal questions might potentially be tied into this motivation. One might sympathize, if only it were that simple. Lamentably, it is not just an innocuous question of how the schools should label course curricula. This debate runs much deeper than that.

In fact, it is difficult to divorce the Deverian debate over terminology from the larger intellectual trends and movements of the modern era. For a really broad bird’s eye view, one might begin with the current debates in historiography in general.³ One might then narrow the focus slightly to a consideration of philosophical naturalism’s inroads

¹ Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000—586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 32.

² Ibid.

³ For a perspective on the broader debate, see the classic volume by Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1966).

into the thought processes of our contemporaries.¹ After reading such works, one realizes that the debate in archaeology has not occurred in a vacuum.

Yet, “Dever lost the debate,” says Ziony Zevit.² “Biblical Archaeology” is still here. Why all the fuss, then?

The call for a change in terminology was intended to sever the connection between the archaeological and the theological, to disallow any claims that archaeology of the physical had implications for the metaphysical, to ‘academize’ archaeology completely and distance it from ‘unacademizable’ theology, and to delegitimize any interpretative authority that theologically-driven Biblicists might claim over archaeological data.³

Apologist Norman Geisler perceives rightly about the data of archaeology: “How it is understood depends on the interpreter’s presuppositions. Therefore, not all

¹ For a helpful description of this issue, see the incisive study by Philip E. Johnson on the permeation of *methodological naturalism* in academia, and its influence on nearly every field of study, in Philip E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995). For an especially insightful essay on the so-called “faith-knowledge dichotomy,” see also the chapter in Philip E. Johnson, “How the Universities Were Lost,” in *Objections Sustained: Subversive Essays on Evolution, Law & Culture* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 114-120.

² Ziony Zevit, “Biblical Archaeology versus Syro-Palestinian Archaeology,” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 17.

³ Ibid. My first response is, finally, the proverbial cat is out of the bag! In all the hoopla over a name change, there were definitely presuppositional motivations involved. Second, the desire to “sever” the connection between the archaeological and the theological already betrays a hidden agenda, i.e., a secularist presupposition which *presumes* the presence of actual discrepancies between objective Syro-Palestinian archaeology and Biblical archaeology. Zevit continues by showing how James D. Smart really nailed it down about how the educational community moves to relegate the Biblicist’s studies to an inferior status or to be largely ignored in terms of the latter’s interest in claiming revelation or authority for the Bible (ibid. 17-18). Third, “to disallow any claims that archaeology of the physical had implications for the metaphysical” assumes a particular religious epistemology that begs the whole question in this discussion! If God is the author of Scripture, and if God in Scripture makes historic truth claims about particular persons, places, or events, then if those claims were to be convincingly falsified, the doctrine of verbal inspiration and inerrancy would also (*modus tollens*) be falsified! Fourth, it sounds supercilious at the least to say that “theology” is ‘unacademizable,’ unless one only means that the secular universities might get into trouble if they allow faculty or staff to profess faith in the Bible or take funding for digs for that express purpose. But, is there not a hidden presupposition here? Is the secular inherently more academically respectable than the theological? Fifth, “to delegitimize any interpretative authority that the theologically-driven Biblicists might claim over archaeological data” sounds like Zevit is talking about a sophomoric turf war, unless something more sinister is here at work. It may be that it is the desire of scholars who defend secularist methodologies and presuppositions ultimately to vanquish the supernaturalist’s interpretation of Scripture (which is methodological naturalism at its worst!)

interpretations of the evidence will be friendly to Christianity.”¹ The data are not cold and hard. The presuppositions of the investigator are responsible in large measure for the interpretations given the data. Therefore it appears to this reviewer that fundamentally different presuppositions have been at work in the recent clamor for Biblical Archaeology to give way to some more neutral or secular variety of the discipline.²

EPISTEMOLOGY AND HISTORICISM—THE PHILOSOPHY OF EVIDENCE

In short, this is not exclusively a debate about the science of archaeology. It is also a debate about the nature and role of evidence for creating faith. It is a debate about the nature of the Bible. It is a debate about classical, evidentiary apologetics vis-à-vis some form of voluntarism or fideism. It is a debate about whether it is proper to bifurcate faith and reason or faith and empirical fact.

Merling cites Dever, who himself quotes from G. Ernest Wright, “to say that ‘everything depends upon whether the central events actually occurred.’”³ Merling goes on to explain that,

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, when Wright’s own students—Dever being one of them—demonstrated that those ‘central events’ did not occur, in Dever’s view biblical archaeology and theology died...In short, the biblical text has been proven to be unreliable thereby killing both biblical archaeology and theology.⁴

So, now we see the real motivation behind the name change movement—a loss of faith!

Merling reminds us that both Dever and J. Maxwell Miller have had evangelical roots,

¹ In *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 1999 ed., s.v. “Archaeology, Old Testament,” by Normal L. Geisler.

² Zevit adds, “As imperceptible as it was in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the debate had precipitated permanent conceptual changes. It disseminated the message that the Albrightian synthesis of biblical studies and archaeology no longer maintained its integrity: archaeologists and Biblicists could part company” (in Zevit, 18).

³ Merling, 30.

⁴ Ibid.

but have come to a loss of faith in the veracity of the Bible by the archaeological finds.¹ (Yet, it begs the question to say that the Bible's historical veracity has been disproved.)

However, Merling soon gets into murky water. He speaks of the tendency to confuse the theory or interpretation of a set of data with the data themselves or with the *realia* to which the theory purportedly corresponds.² In one sense, he has a point. Yet, in another sense, he falls into the postmodern trap of denigrating the correspondence view of truth!³ Merling muses, "Such a change in philosophy puts the archaeological and biblical data in a better defined relationship."⁴

Speaking for a widespread point of view, Merling asserts, "Archaeology cannot determine the trustworthiness of theology or, as again Dever has written, 'create or destroy faith.'"⁵ However, when Merling and others assert such things, they are not really speaking as archaeologists *per se*. Rather, they are making a *theological* judgment, one that betrays a certain stance toward the nature and authority of Scripture.⁶

¹ He adds, "My point is, the change in perception about the Bible that has occurred from 'archaeology demonstrates the reliability of the Bible' to 'the archaeological facts are at odds with the Bible' is so severe that it has encouraged some to make the most major of paradigm shifts, from faith to loss of faith" (ibid., 31).

² Ibid., 40.

³ Merling quotes Larry G. Herr to contrast the correspondence view with the criterion of coherence which "defines truth not as the relationship of statements to facts but as the relationship of statements to each other....The criterion for truth becomes intelligibility and not verifiability through external checkpoints," from Larry G. Herr, "What Archaeology Can and Cannot do," in *Ministry* (Feb 1983), 28, as cited in Merling, 40.

⁴ Ibid. Actually, such an attempted change is highly unhelpful. Once we cut the Gordian knot of the correspondence between language and the real (empirical) world of fact, we are liable to all sorts of eccentric postures that cannot be defended by the normal canons of reasoning.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ Merling adds, "where the problem arises is in trying to separate faith and history" (ibid.). As a matter of fact, this judgment smacks of some type of *fideism* or even a Bultmannian existentialism. It, moreover, denies by implication the doctrine of inerrancy. And since it surreptitiously holds that inerrancy is a mistaken policy, it has made an assessment falling totally outside the realm of archaeology as a science! (*"Fideism is the view that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence,"* writes Richard H Popkin in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967 ed., s.v. "Fideism," by Richard H. Popkin).

We are naïve to believe that if Scripture affirms that such an event occurred at a determined time and place, then that affirmation can be true if, only if, said event occurred at that time and place. This is the verdict of the New Biblical Archaeology. Merling argues that those of us who hold to a correspondence theory of truth are mistaken, and we “likewise have not realized that archaeology and the Bible provide different information, which is largely incapable of being compared and, most often, elusive.”¹

Philosopher J. P. Moreland addresses the issue of the relationship of science to Scripture. Under the heading of “Models of integrating science and theology,” he analyzes one model which sees a “Difference in Essence.” As Moreland describes this model, “Science and theology are concerned with two distinct and separate realms, the natural and the supernatural. Thus, science and theology cannot, even in principle, come into conflict.”²

To this researcher, it appears that this is the kind of model being defended by Dever, Merling, et. al. Yet, as Moreland critiques the model, “the first view is inadequate as a total position on the integration of theology and science, for there are several examples where the two do, in fact, describe the same world.”³ For instance, if Scripture affirms that Ai was destroyed in the conquest, and if the “science” of archaeology indubitably demonstrates that this did not occur (assuming it has identified the real Ai),

¹ Ibid., 42. The reader is urged to consult this researchers’ work on the subject of apologetic methods for a defense of classical evidentialism and the correspondence theory of truth, in Phillip A. Gray, *Training Manual for Cultural Combat: Apologetics and Preaching for the Postmodern Mind* (Longwood, FL: Advantage Books, 2005).

² J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 200.

³ Ibid.

then Scripture would thereby be falsified.¹ So, away with such pious nonsense of “Scripture being spiritual” while “archaeology is empirical”!

ARCHAEOLOGY AND APOLOGETICS

One could be forgiven for detecting an outright antipathy toward Christian apologetics in the community of professional archaeologists. The assumption is that an apologist has an agenda and therefore cannot be trusted to be totally honest or objective with the evidence. On the other hand, we have seen that the counter assumption of the total neutrality or objectivity of the professional archaeologist is a chimera as well.

While archaeology and apologetics are discrete academic disciplines, yet there are obvious areas of overlapping.² They deal with many of the same questions. The clash seems to be over whether an apology for Biblical inspiration and inerrancy can really be impartial in its handling of the evidence. This writer believes that it can be in principle.³

Apologetics is a comprehensive discipline that contains both a negative and a positive component to the defense of the Bible. Negatively, it must counter the claims of the destructive critics. In that way, surely archaeology has been a helpful handmaiden.⁴ Yet, positively, it can set forth various lines of evidence in favor of the inspiration of Scripture. One approach is to begin with the historic indications for the life and teachings

¹ John Gerstner aptly explains the issue: “Neither archaeology nor any other science can ever prove that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. But they could prove that it is not,” in John H. Gerstner, *Reasons for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967, 1977), 116. Scripture is capable of both being falsified and verified. Verified if corresponding with the facts; falsified if not corresponding with the facts.

² This is particularly true for the apologetic approach known as “classical evidentialism.”

³ Part of the problem has been a misunderstanding of what the apologetic task really is in terms of reasoning from evidence to the historical integrity of Scripture. The stones do not cry out “God wrote this” simply because a statement is factual. And archaeology cannot answer all the relevant questions about the origin and nature of the Bible. Gerstner noted, “We do not expect it to be able to test every historical utterance in the entire Bible, but we are interested to hear what it has to say about those it has been able to test” (Gerstner, 117).

⁴ Barbara Zink MacHaffie, “‘Monumental Facts and Higher Critical Fancies’: Archaeology and the Popularization of Old Testament Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Church History* (Sep 1981): 319.

of Jesus. From these data, it can be deduced that Jesus was God incarnate. Thus, his view of Scripture is all-important. From these data, his view is found to be in favor of the doctrine of inerrancy.

Thus, that doctrine may be defended by challenging the critics (including archaeologists who have wandered from their reservations) to produce incorrigible evidence that the Bible contains unhistorical events. If an interpretation of the data can be found that does square with both the actual archaeological finds and a sound Biblical exegesis, it may be set forth as a hypothesis to be tested, a la Carnell's *verificationist* method of apologetics (as hypothesis testing).¹ If such verification is forthcoming, it can in turn become the premise for a long chain argumentation on behalf of the doctrine of Biblical authenticity and inspiration.²

CONCLUSION

The animosity between apologetics and archaeology is unnecessary. The candid apologist should use the archaeological data responsibly. The candid archaeologist should confess that he is not immune to the human tendency of harboring presuppositions and may in fact become, despite his best intentions, a witting or unwitting "apologist" for a particular way of looking at faith and the Bible. However, such presuppositions should be exposed from the outset in any serious discussion of archaeology and the Bible.³

¹ Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948, 1978), 103 *passim*. It may also be shown that the critic has not established his case if a plausible alternative explanation is proffered.

² As Gerstner points out, "...we suppose that, respecting the basic reliability of the Bible, one may be well disposed to consider its claim for its own inspiration, which argument we have tried to set forth" (in Gerstner, 124).

³ As William Lane Craig counsels, we should make an "inference to the best explanation." He explains, "...we begin with the evidence available to us and then infer what would, if true, provide the best explanation of that evidence. Out of a pool of live options determined by our background beliefs, we select the best of various competing potential explanations to give us a causal account of why the evidence is as it is rather than otherwise," in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*

The proper methodology should be to set forth as impartially as possible the opposing models of interpretations (both the minimalists' and maximalists') and then test each of them for 1) internal consistency (coherence) and 2) correlation with the greatest number of the facts (correspondence). Such testing of the competing frameworks of interpretation is the best method for eliminating as far as possible the purely subjective element in research and for establishing a cogent (albeit probabilistic) case on behalf of the reliability of the Bible. In that sense, archaeology can *prove* the Bible after all!

(Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1984, 1994), 182. It is such background beliefs that this research has sought to draw out for closer scrutiny.

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