

BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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Patriarchal Age

Scholarly assessment of the historicity of the biblical narratives differs significantly. As early as the 19th century, J. Wellhausen had assumed that nothing historical could be derived from these accounts, calling them a "glorified mirage." This assessment changed radically in the first part of the 20th century with the counterclaim of W. F. Albright and E. Speiser, among others, for a large degree of historicity on the basis of comparative archaeological finds from sites outside of Canaan. Although Albright's approach finds many staunch adherents to this day, a revisionist school in the latter decades of the 20th century has reverted to regarding the patriarchal narratives, as well as the entire Bible, as devoid of historical accuracy. Most scholars, however, have taken the middle road between credence and rejection.

Exodus and Wilderness Era

The contribution of archaeology to the biblical narratives in the last four books of the Torah is likewise limited. There is no reference in Egyptian sources to Israel's sojourn in that country, and the evidence that does exist is negligible and indirect. The period of servitude that entailed building the cities of Pithom and Rameses seems to fit best the reign of Rameses II, who ruled in the 13th century B.C.E. By the end of that century, Israel was already a recognized entity in Canaan, as indicated by a reference to it on a stele of Pharaoh Merneptah (ca. 1207 B.C.E.) noting the king's victory over a people called Israel.

Indications of an Egyptian sojourn may likewise be indicated by the names that appear in the Joseph narrative at the end of Genesis: Joseph's wife, Asenath, and that of his master, Potiphar, are Egyptian; and Joseph himself had an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah. Moreover, the Hyksos period in Egypt, when the country was ruled by Asiatic princes, dates to the 17th and 16th centuries B.C.E., and some scholars regard this as the setting of the Joseph narrative. The land of Goshen, the region of Israelite settlement in Egypt, was probably in the eastern Nile delta where the Hyksos capital, Avaris, was likewise located; and the expulsion of the Hyksos may be related to the beginning of Israel's troubles in the country ("A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph"; Exod. 1:8).

Conquest and Settlement of Canaan

The period of the conquest and settlement of Canaan is arguably the most controversial issue in biblical history. The Book of Joshua appears to offer a straightforward description of an immediate and complete conquest, but the Book of Judges relates a different story: Rather than conquest followed by an allotment of the Land, Judges speaks of a reverse process, whereby the Land was first divided up and then each tribe, or several tribes together, proceeded to conquer their respective territories. In contrast to the picture of a total and immediate conquest in Josh. 11:16–20, Judges acknowledges that many cities were not subdued (Judg. 1:21, 27–33), that the period of conquest lasted a long time, and that the acquisition was carried out in various ways, including by peaceful settlement.

The not inconsiderable amount of archaeological evidence for this period is likewise ambiguous. Remains of a violent conquest in the 13th century B.C.E. are evident at Hazor, thus corroborating the biblical account; but the unwalled and uninhabited Jericho and Ai, respectively, clearly seem to contradict the violent and complete conquest portrayed in the Book of Joshua. Although Hazor may well be tied to events recorded in the Bible, it is also possible that its destruction was the result of other factors, such as the 13th-century-B.C.E. conquest by the Sea Peoples, a population that migrated from Greece and the Aegean islands and wrought havoc throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The degree to which Joshua and Judges can be culled for kernels of historical truth or simply considered as theologically motivated accounts using a historical framework for their purposes is a basic controversy in academic circles.

Period of the Monarchy

Archaeological material has raised questions regarding certain assumptions and claims based on biblical literature. At times this evidence clearly contradicts the biblical narrative; on other occasions, data that might have corroborated the literary account are conspicuously lacking. An example of the latter is the almost total absence of archaeological evidence from Davidic and Solomonic Jerusalem. The Bible devotes an inordinate amount of space to the reigns of these two kings who purportedly developed their new capital city in many directions. Yet, archaeologists are hard pressed to identify any building, wall remains, or other installation as belonging to this period. Is this coincidental or, as the revisionists would have it, is the biblical account perhaps vastly exaggerated, serving, as it does, the propagandist agenda of the later Davidic dynasty?

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