

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Historical Accuracy of Biblical Documents

by Dan Trygg

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. ² For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, ³ how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴ God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.”
Hebrews 2:1-4

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, ³ it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; ⁴ so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”
Luke 1:1-4

We have talked about the historical nature of the biblical faith, and of the testimony that it records. **The Bible is not stories, poetry, or the ideas of men. It is a record of God’s interactions with many people, over generations of time, in many locations, teaching them about Himself, revealing His purpose and will for them, and laying down a trail of prophetic breadcrumbs that would help to identify the Savior that He intended to bring to our planet.**

We discussed last week how **these writings had been authored centuries ago, and had been copied and transmitted over and over.** We needed to determine if these writings had been faithfully copied and transmitted, if they could serve as a reliable source of the historical record and the testimony of the authors. What we found was that **there is no other literary work of antiquity that has anywhere near the vast number of manuscript witnesses, or anything like the early manuscript copies, as the Bible, especially the NT, has.** The NT has over 24,600 manuscripts, dated to within 25-40 years of the writing by the original authors. Regarding the OT, there have been over 300 biblical scrolls found among the Dead Sea scrolls, many dating to 250 BC. In addition, the Nash Papyrus, dating from the first century BC, includes portions of Exodus and Deuteronomy. A silver amulet, covered with Hebrew scriptures dating from before the destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC) has been found. The Samaritan Pentateuch, dating to the third century BC, has also been found. Recently, a strip of lead (ca. 1300 BC) was found in the ruins of an altar on Mt. Ebal (Josh 8:30,31), containing biblical curses and the name YHWH. Early translations also support the biblical text. **No other writing of ancient history has the early and broad support of manuscript evidence as the Bible does.**

This establishes the credibility of the process of transmission from the original writings to the modern times. **But what about the historical accuracy of what is found reported there? Is the Bible a credible source of history,** or just a fictional fabrication? How can we verify the accuracy of what was being reported?

If we can show that the authors were consistently accurate and reliable in those areas where they can be tested, then we can likely trust their testimony in those areas where we cannot confirm their statements or claims with external evidence. That is the nature of history and testimony. We cannot go back in time to witness again the things that took place. The best we can do is find confirming testimony, ...or show that an author is *not* reliable. **External evidence consists of confirmation by other sources, and the actual artifacts uncovered by archaeology.**

Here are some examples of confirmation from archaeological discoveries:

(1.) Mari and Nuzi tablets (1800-1760 BC) – Clay tablets written in an ancient Akkadian cuneiform script that confirm many of the personal customs we read about in Genesis. Biblical personal and place names are confirmed as consistent with names at that time and location. Customs such as treaty practices, and the surrogate/adoption custom suggested by Sarai as a way to obtain a child, are confirmed as being contemporaneous practices in that culture. The name of YHWH is also found in these tablets, though not the focus of the worship of these ancient Sumerians.

(2.) The names of the kings and the area of their rule from Genesis 14 are confirmed by archaeology. Chedorlaomer, king of Elam; Arioch, king of Ellasar; and Tidal, king of Gazza; and the king of Shinar (Sumer).

(3.) The Soleb inscription of Amenhotep III (ca. 1400 BC) has a list of territories that the king claims to have conquered. This includes an image of a Semetic-looking prisoner (not African) from the “lands of the nomads of Yahweh”. The other surrounding place-names indicate that this is from the area of Canaan. This is one of the oldest examples of the name Yahweh outside of the Bible, and places Yahweh worshipers in Canaan previous to 1400 BC.

(4.) The Berlin Pedestal (15th century BC) almost certainly depicts Israel as a nation being in Canaan. If this interpretation is correct, it would indicate that Israel had migrated there at the exact time the Bible states.

(5.) The Merneptah Stele (ca. 1208 BC) depicts a military campaign by the Egyptian king against Libya and the land of Canaan. It says, “Israel is wasted, its seed is not”, even though it lists only three cities that were captured.

(6.) The treaty between Yahweh and the Hebrews at Mount Sinai follows the unique pattern of a Hittite suzerainty treaty. The Hittite empire was significant between 1700 BC-1200 BC. This treaty form reflects a well-established and recognizable form consistent with the time of the Exodus, but which soon fell into disuse. Yahweh used a treaty form that the Israelites would have understood, and this indicates that the record of Exodus and Deuteronomy were authored at the time reflected in scripture. This is a strong argument against the “documentary hypothesis”, which argued that the Pentateuch was by authored by four sources and compiled in the 7th century BC.

(7.) The walls of Jericho. Three archaeological expeditions confirmed that three of the walls of Jericho tumbled down, outwardly, leaving the city exposed to the attack of the Israelites. A portion of the northern wall, however, remained standing. Evidence of burning and destruction confirms the razing of the city by the Israelites. The standing wall is evidence that Rahab’s house, which was built into the wall, remained untouched (Josh. 6:16-23).

(8.) “Burn layers” found at the cities of Jericho, Ai, and Hazor are dated to the 15th century BC.

(9.) An altar found on Mt. Ebal was built over an earlier one built by the Israelites, dated to 1400 BC. A bronze Egyptian scarab, dating from the reign of Thutmose III (d. 1452 BC) was found within it (Josh. 8:30-35).

(10.) The Amarna Tablets are a collection of letters between Egyptian pharaohs and their vassals in Canaan in the mid fourteenth century BC. The vassals ask for help from the Egyptian kings to put down the “Habiru”, who were taking over the land. The letters describe a loose confederacy of independent city states, which is consistent with the Biblical record. Interestingly, there are no such letters from those cities that had been defeated by Joshua earlier.

(11.) The Mesha Stele, or Moabite Stone (840 BC), contains explicit references to “the house of David”.

(12.) Discovery of the seals of Biblical persons – The seal of king Hezekiah, Isaiah the prophet and Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah, have been found. Also that of Gedaliah, son of Pashur, and Jucal, son of Shelamiah (Jer. 38:1).

(13.) Pilate inscription. Discovery of an inscription on a dedication stone at Caesarea identified Pontius Pilate as governor of Judea during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Critics had said he was a fictional character.

(14.) The incredible accuracy of Luke. Luke made reference to fifty-four cities in thirty-two countries, and nine islands, and never made a single error. Moreover, he accurately identified the local names for public officials, even though these were unusual, again with no mistakes. Sir William Ramsey, who began as a skeptic of the Bible was so impressed with Luke’s accuracy, he began to use Luke as his primary source for locating NT cities.

(15.) The location of Biblical places. The city of Capernaum, its synagogue and even Peter’s house have been located. The pool of Bethesda, with its five porches, has been discovered. Even the house of Caiaphas, the high priest who condemned Jesus to death, has been discovered. Archaeology continues to confirm the Bible.

(16.) The identification of Biblical people. We have the ossuary (‘bone box’) of James, the brother of Jesus, and even the ossuary of Joseph Caiaphas himself. There is an inscription in a pavement in Corinth, saying that Erastus paid for the pavement at his own expense. Erastus is mentioned in Romans 16:23; Acts 19:21-22; and 2 Tim. 4:20.

(17.) Seal ring confirming Pilate. A copper seal ring with Pilate’s name and title has been found.

(18.) Confirmation of Biblical events. For example, the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius in 49 has been confirmed by several extrabiblical sources. That Gallio was proconsul of Achaia is also confirmed as being between 50-51 AD, which fits the timeline of the book of Acts (18:1-12).

(19.) Inscriptions by non-believers document historicity of Jesus. Jewish historian, Josephus (37-100AD), confirms Jesus’ existence. He was known for “wonderful works” and His teachings, and was handed over by Jewish leaders and condemned to be crucified by Pontius Pilate, and that it was reported that He rose again on the third day. Pliny the Younger (112 AD) from Bythynia documents that followers of Christ met before dawn to worship Him, to encourage their commitment to righteous living, and share a meal. Tacitus (115 AD), writing of Nero’s persecution of Christians, mentions that Christ had been condemned to death by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius.

(20.) The discovery of a crucified man. Until 1968 no *physical evidence* of crucifixion had been found. That year, the discovery of the ossuary of a man who had been crucified in 42 AD confirmed the Biblical account of Jesus’ crucifixion. The man’s feet and ankles had been pinned to the cross by a large iron spike.

Because the Bible is an historical record of peoples’ experiences, there are literally thousands of references to persons, places, and events. **Archaeology has established the amazing accuracy of the biblical authors, an accuracy that is unmatched by other ancient writings.** The fact that the testimony of the authors is so precise in the details where we have been able to test the record against what archaeology has discovered, gives great credibility to their testimony in areas where their reports cannot be verified. **The Bible has been shown to be historically accurate, verified over and over again, by artifacts and documents found through archaeology.** Let me state it clearly: ***There is no other document of ancient history that has the level of confirmed accuracy as the biblical documents do.*** There have been multiple external sources of confirmation, and **there has never been a single example of direct contradiction in any archaeological artifact.** **Archaeology has only served to confirm, again and again, the biblical record. We can trust the testimony of the biblical authors, who have been shown to be consistently reliable.**