

think

LIGHT FROM THE PAST

# Rewriting Ancient History

History is *written* by the victorious, but it can be *rewritten* by anyone. Nowhere is this truer than in the study of biblical history. Because of its nature, the Bible is one of the best loved—and most hated—books ever written. Some choose to build their lives around it. Others take a more hostile approach, rewriting the past to make the Bible irrelevant for modern man. Motivated by everything from politics to personal bias, the revision of biblical history is at an all-time high.

The Bible is one of the most hotly contested books in the world. This is illustrated by an article in the July 29, 2000 *New York Times* entitled, “The Bible, As History, Flunks New Archaeological Tests.” Gustav Niebuhr attempts to show that modern archaeologists consider the exodus and Joshua’s conquest to be figments of human imagination, little more than pious fiction penned by an ancient author. Niebuhr’s bombshell might take many Christians by surprise until they realize just how the author arrived at his conclusions: by citing only radically liberal archaeologists and downplaying evidence that supports the biblical record.

We can see the results of poor research in recent attacks on Scripture. In *The Da Vinci Code*, author Dan Brown argues that in order to understand the “real” Jesus, we have to first examine the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary*. Both portray a Jesus who is very human. Here Brown has to stick his head in the sand to maintain the theory that Jesus was a mortal man. He has to ignore two very important things that are never mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code*. First, the *Gospel of Thomas*, a Gnostic work includes a few sayings that show that Jesus is more than mortal. Jesus says, “Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone; I am there” (*Gospel of Thomas*, 77). If Jesus is present everywhere in nature, then He is obviously more than just a man.

Second, Brown never mentions Jesus’ mother. Mary is a principal figure in Roman Catholicism with her own distinctive area of theological study called Mariology. Prayers are directed toward her. She has her own feast days. Catholic leaders elevated the mother of Jesus to an extremely high position beginning as early as the second century. Regardless, Brown says that Roman Catholicism suppressed women, which is why the truth of Mary Magdalene’s marriage to Jesus has been covered up for so many

centuries. But did the Roman Catholicism really suppress women? Mary has been revered for nearly two millennia by the Catholics. This fact has to be overlooked for Brown’s imaginary conspiracy theory to work.

The convenient ignorance of the evidence is found on more than just the popular level. Scholars who criticize the Bible are equally guilty of ignoring and even manipulating evidence to fit their theories. Those hostile to the Bible have long said either that king David did not exist or that he was no more than a petty chieftain. Unfortunately, very little

---

If Jesus is  
present  
everywhere  
in nature,  
then He is  
obviously  
more than  
just a man.

---

archaeological evidence from David’s era remains. Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt numerous times throughout its history, making the recovery of ancient artifacts extremely difficult. The truth is that we would not expect to find much evidence—if any—for the existence of David outside the Bible.

But there are two very important pieces of evidence. First is the Tel Dan Inscription. Three pieces of a stone monument were found in 1993-94 at the ancient city of Dan by archaeologist Avraham Biran. This is an inscription that mentions the defeat of the Israelite and Judean kings Ahaziah and Jehoram who fought against Hazael of Damascus (see 2 Ki. 8:25-29). The broken text on the inscription mentions “Jehoram, king of the house of David.” We know from ancient records that it was common to refer to a monarch as “X of the house of Y” (in our case, “Jehoram of the house of David”). For nearly two hundred years

the Assyrians referred to the Northern Kingdom as the “House of Omri” after the Israelite king. With the reference to the “house of David,” we are on solid historical footing.

A second inscription called the Moabite Stone (or Mesha Stele) found in 1868 also refers to the house of David. King Mesha of Moab, who carved the inscription, records that Omri had oppressed his country (cf. 2 Ki. 3) for forty years. He broke away from Israelite rule during the reign of Ahab’s son Jehoram. He refers to the “house of David” in the inscription, again giving an independent witness to verify the existence of the biblical king.

Going back farther in history, we see that archaeology helps to verify the factual accuracy of the earliest parts of the Bible. Some think the Pentateuch is pure fiction, authored somewhere between the 10th and 6th centuries BC. In the text we find small details that point to an earlier date, confirming the historicity of the people, places, and events recorded. The names of Moses, Phinehas, Hur and Joseph’s wife and father-in-law are thoroughly Egyptian. The story of the Ten Plagues presupposes knowledge of Egyptian religious beliefs. The king of Egypt is called “pharaoh,” which the Egyptians used for their kings for a limited time during the days of Moses. They later stopped using this title and referred to their kings by name, which the Bible also does at the proper time. If the Pentateuch were not written until centuries later, how would a Hebrew writer know such particular details? Ancient writers did not write historical fiction, carefully researching minute historical and political details to make the story as convincing as possible. The evidence points to a knowledge of Egyptian culture at the right time.

The examples above are just the beginning of the evidence. For every period of biblical history, there is evidence confirming the validity of the Bible, either directly or indirectly. It is unfortunate that in order to deny the truth of Scripture scholars must ignore the plain facts that corroborate biblical events and people. At the same time, Christians should not be afraid of the evidence. While we may not always have as much information as we would like, neither the evidence nor Scripture will conflict with one another when interpreted properly. ▲