THE BATTLE FOR
OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY
AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

On November 13, 2008, a two-hour NOVA special on biblical archaeology\(^1\) titled “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” aired on television. The documentary revealed the disagreement between archaeologists over the historicity of many people and events recorded in the Bible. Paula Apsell, senior executive producer of the NOVA special, said,

“The Bible’s Buried Secrets” is an archaeological journey into the Hebrew Bible, more commonly known as the Old Testament. It

\(^1\) Archaeology is a branch of historical research that seeks to reveal the past history of an ancient people by a systematic recovery of its surviving remains. Archaeologists excavate and evaluate remains from the past which include ancient written records, buildings, tools, weapons, jewelry, coins, pottery, art, and other ancient artifacts. Biblical archaeology is the science of excavation, decipherment, and critical evaluation of ancient material records related to the Bible. Archaeologists dig up tells or mounds by digging through layers. The ancient peoples often used the stones from a destroyed city to rebuild their cities. As a result a tell or mound was built up over many centuries. Archaeologists dig through the layers and discover walls, buildings, and artifacts. They photograph artifacts in situ (real-life situation). They then write reports describing these objects and their location. The artifacts are then removed, examined, classified, packaged, and shipped to a museum.
builds on centuries of biblical scholarship and excavation to tackle some of the biggest questions in biblical studies: Where did the ancient Israelites come from? How and when did their religion transform into modern Judaism? Who wrote the Bible, when and why? How did the ancient Israelites, who like virtually all ancient peoples, worshipped many gods, come to believe in a single God? The answers to these questions emerge as we look both at the archaeological evidence and at the biblical text itself—the powerful accounts describing Abraham and his journey to the Promised Land; Moses and the Exodus; David’s kingdom and Solomon’s Temple; and the destruction of that temple and Jerusalem followed by the Exile of the Jews to Babylon.  

Minimalist archaeologists believe that there is no archaeological evidence of an Exodus from Egypt or of an Israelite conquest of Canaan. Some minimalists contend that ancient Israel as described in the Bible never existed. They believe that Abraham, Moses, and David and Solomon are fictional characters of Hebrew mythology. Minimalists generally accept the Documentary Hypothesis (JEDP theory) regarding the origin of the Pentateuch.

One prominent archaeologist, Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University, has written a book called The Bible Unearthed. He writes,

But that is not to say that archaeology has proved the biblical narrative to be true in all its details. Far from it: it is now evident that many events of biblical history did not take place in either the particular era or the manner described. Some of the most famous events in the Bible clearly never happened at all.

Archaeology has helped to reconstruct the history behind the Bible, both on the level of great kings and kingdoms and in the modes of everyday life. And as we will explain in the following chapters, we now know that the early books of the Bible and their famous stories of early Israelite history were first codified (and in

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key respects composed) at an identifiable place and time: Jerusalem in the seventh century B.C.E.³

Minimalists discount the historicity of the Bible. Magee writes,

The modern school allows us to evaluate the bible more objectively. If the artefacts [sic] and the bible just do not match up, then the artifacts help us construct a history of ancient Israel from which we can judge the sufficiency of the bible.

The bible emerges as a work of literature, not history, so archaeology and the bible will conflict. The bible is a religious narrative that does not have to be true history. If there is history in the bible it is incidental. Discrepancies with history are to be expected in literary work. The bible was not meant to be history and so should not be scorned as history but appreciated as religious literature.

The biblical texts are all late, written centuries after the events they portray. Form criticism and textual criticism made scholars suspect that the biblical literature was addressed to a small group of people who under the Persians were deported and resettled in the land of Judah in the fifth century B.C. Archaeology confirms that biblical texts were not written close to the events they describe. Archaeology also shows that many biblical events have not happened in history!⁴

Mario Liverani, professor of ancient Near East history at the University of Rome, gives a minimalist perspective of Israel’s archaeology and history in his book Israel’s History and the History of Israel.⁵ He argues that the history of Israel found in


The OT is a creation of the post-exilic community written to justify the resettlement of the Jews in Israel during the Persian period. Liverani believes that the history of Israel from the patriarchs to the end of the united monarchy was invented to justify the occupation of the land by the Jews who returned after the decree of Cyrus in 537 BC. Liverani calls the returnees Zionists and the people who stayed in Israel “the people of the land.” Liverani argues that the returnees needed to justify their reoccupation of their land, so they invented the stories of Abraham, Joshua, and David to argue for their land rights. The returnees invented the exodus to prove that they had the right to take what was rightfully theirs.

Biblical archaeologists (also called maximalists) argue that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It is true that archaeologists have not discovered any extrabiblical evidence that Abraham existed, that Israel was enslaved in Egypt, or that Solomon built a temple on the temple mount. Archaeologists have not discovered the ark of Noah on the mountains of Ararat or the ark of the covenant that was in Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. The failure to find these historical objects does not diminish the biblical archaeologists’ confidence in the truthfulness of the scriptures. Biblical archaeologists claim that the Bible is an ancient text that is historically accurate.

Randall Price writes,

In the final analysis, it must be remembered that the Bible itself is our finest example of an archaeological document. While we have only a limited number of archaeological artifacts from the biblical period, the Bible represents the most complete literary record we possess of ancient times. Surviving in one form or another since its first books were penned by Moses some 3400 years ago, it remains the most accurate and trustworthy account of antiquity in the archaeological record. For this reason it is improper to elevate

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other archaeological inscriptions above the biblical text in order to challenge the latter's integrity.\(^8\)

Biblical archaeologists would argue that discoveries made by archaeologists have confirmed the historicity of the biblical text. The Bible is a credible historical source of information. The Bible gives a true historical record of past people, places, and events. Archaeologists have used the Bible in order to find various places in Israel. The Bible can be used to interpret archaeological discoveries. The chronology of the Bible can be used to date various archaeological discoveries.

W. F. Albright writes,

The excessive skepticism shown toward the Bible by important historical schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certain phases of which still appear periodically, has been progressively discredited. Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details and has brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history.\(^9\)

Nelson Glueck writes, “As a matter of fact, however, it may be clearly stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a single biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible.”\(^10\)

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THE ORIGIN OF THE PENTATEUCH

The PBS program “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” presented the Documentary Hypothesis\(^\text{11}\) or the JEDP theory of the origin of the Hebrew OT. Shaye Cohen asserts that the Torah is a product of the Babylonian exile:

Most modern scholars agree that the Torah more or less attained shape in the Exilic period and the period of the return. We do not mean that the Torah was written from scratch at that point. It was obviously not. Clearly in earlier centuries there were stories, laws, genealogies that were circulating, perhaps in written form. But it is this period, the 5\(^{th}\) century B.C.E. when these diverse strands were woven together to create a single book, or in this case, a five part book, the Torah.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{11}\) Julius Wellhausen (1876) explained the documentary hypothesis (JEDP theory) of the origin of the Pentateuch in his Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (English translation: New York: Meridian Books, 1957). He first divided the Pentateuch into two sources which contained the different names of God: Jehovah (J) and Elohim (E). The J source was supposedly written around 850 BC in the southern kingdom of Judah. Finkelstein thinks that the J source should be dated from 970-930 BC. Wellhausen thought that the E source (E for Elohim) was supposedly written in 750 BC in the northern kingdom of Israel. Finkelstein dates E from 930-720 BC. The source J and E were then combined after the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Around 650 BC, the D source (D for Deuteronomy) was supposedly written to encourage the worship of the Lord God at the temple in Jerusalem. JED were combined sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In 570 BC Ezra supposedly wrote the P source (P for priest) giving specific instructions for priests and the sacrifices. By 400 BC the final JEDP document that makes up the Pentateuch today was complete.

Finkelstein and Silberman in their book *The Bible Unearthed* write,

As we shall see in the coming chapters, archaeology has provided enough evidence to support a new contention that the historical core of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History was substantially shaped in the seventh century BCE. We will therefore put the spotlight on late eighth and seventh century BCE Judah, when this literary process began in earnest, and shall argue that much of the Pentateuch is a late monarchic creation, advocating the ideology and needs of the kingdom of Judah, and as such is intimately connected to the Deuteronomistic History. And we shall side with the scholars who argue that the Deuteronomistic History was compiled, in the main, in the time of King Josiah, aiming to provide an ideological validation for particular political ambitions and religious reforms.\(^{13}\)

Minimalists do not agree on the dating of the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy) and the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua-2 Kings). Cohen and Finkelstein both accept the Documentary Hypothesis but have different dates for when they believe the Torah and Deuteronomistic History was written. Finkelstein thinks that these books were written during the reign of King Josiah (639-608 BC). Cohen holds to the period of the exile (586-516 BC) or the post-exilic period (after 516 BC).

I believe that Moses wrote the Torah or Pentateuch (Exod 17:14; 24:4; Num 33:1-2; Deut 31:9; Josh 1:8; 2 Kgs 21:8; Ezra 6:18; Neh 13:1; Dan 9:11, 13; Mal 4:4). Jesus believed that Moses wrote the Torah (Matt 8:4; Mark 12:26). Jesus referred to the OT as “Moses and the prophets” (Luke 16:31). Moses knew how to write. Moses was “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). Exodus 34:27 states that God told Moses to write down these words. Moses probably wrote the Torah in the wilderness sometime between the Exodus and his death on Mt. Nebo (1445-1400 BC). Those who believe in the Documentary Hypothesis argue that Moses could not have written the Torah because Deuteronomy 34 records the death of

\(^{13}\) Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 14.
Moses and Moses could not have written that account. Moses did not write about his death. Moses wrote Genesis through Deuteronomy 33, and Joshua (the successor of Moses) probably wrote Deuteronomy 34 before he wrote his book.

**THE HISTORICITY OF THE PATRIARCHS**

Minimalist archaeologists believe that the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob never existed. They would agree with Wellhausen who rejects the historicity of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis:

> From the patriarchal narratives it is impossible to obtain any historical information with regard to the patriarchs. We can only learn something about the time in which the stories about them were first told by the Israelite people. This later period, with all its essential and superficial characteristics, was unintentionally projected backward into hoary antiquity, and is reflected there like a transfigured mirage.\(^\text{14}\)

For Gunkel, the stories of the patriarchs were sagas or legends, instead of accurate historical records. Gunkel considers the patriarchs to be personified tribes instead of real humans.\(^\text{15}\) Eissfeldt writes that the patriarchs “have thus become representatives of the post-Mosaic people of Israel projected back into the pre-Mosaic age; what they do and endure ... reveals indirectly the circumstances of an Israel settled in Canaan.”\(^\text{16}\)

Minimalist Thomas L. Thompson refutes the archaeological evidence for a patriarchal age in Israel’s history in his book *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*. He attacks the view that archaeology supported a second millennium BC setting for the

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patriarchal narratives. Thompson views the patriarchal narratives as literary creations with no historical value. He concludes, “The results of my own investigations, if they are for the most part acceptable, seem sufficient to require a complete reappraisal of the current position on the historical character of the patriarchal narratives. These results support the minority position that the text of Genesis is not a historical document.”

Minimalist John van Seters in his book *Abraham in History and Tradition* also denies the second millennium BC setting of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. Seters believes that everything in the Genesis narratives was a response to what happened to Israel in the exile. He argues that the Yahwist (J) was an author during the period of the exile and not an editor of oral and written traditions passed down through the centuries. Seters views Abraham as a fictional character. He denies the validity of any second millennium archaeological connections.

Finkelstein and Silberman reject the historicity of the patriarchs. They believe that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were legends and myths “with no more historical basis than the Homeric saga of Odysseus’s travels or Virgil’s saga of Aenea’s founding of Rome.”

William Dever, Professor Emeritus of the University of Arizona, has studied the archaeology of the ancient Near East for more than thirty years. He is asked in the program “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” if there is any archaeological evidence for Abraham. He replies,

One of the first efforts of biblical archaeology in the last century was to prove the historicity of the patriarchs, to locate them in a particular period in the archaeological history. Today I think most archaeologists would argue that there is no direct archaeological

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19 Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 36.
proof that Abraham, for instance, ever lived. We do know a lot about pastoral nomads, we know about the Amorites migrations from Mesopotamia to Canaan, and it's possible to see in that an Abraham like figure somewhere around 1800 B.C.E. But there's no direct connection.\textsuperscript{20}

The maximalist view of the patriarchal narratives considers the biblical text in its historical context and concludes that the biblical text contains an accurate historical record of the patriarchs. Middle Eastern archaeological discoveries in the twentieth century cast new light on the book of Genesis and helped scholars see Genesis in its historical background.

Archaeologist Albright gives this summary: "... the picture in Genesis is historical, and there is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the biographical details and the sketches of personality which make the Patriarchs come alive with a vividness unknown to a single extra-biblical character in the whole vast literature of the ancient Near East."\textsuperscript{21}

Archaeologist K. A. Kitchen argues for the historicity of the biblical narratives in his book \textit{The Bible In Its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today}. He writes,

The patriarchal narratives of Genesis 11-50 can be seen to be wholly different from the third class of ancient Near-Eastern narratives, the vague fictions and fantasies of The Shipwrecked Sailor or the Tale of the Two Brothers. One need only read these and the Genesis narratives to see the striking differences. The latter, again, are also visibly different from the second class of ancient Near-Eastern narratives, the “historical” legends... And stylistically, the Genesis narratives are expressed in straightforward prose—not the stilted epic poetry of such as Keret and Danel at Ugarit. In both content and literary mould, the patriarchal narratives are visibly more “realistic” and seemingly


‘historical” than anything in most of the historical legends of the ancient Near East.\textsuperscript{22}

Biblical archaeologists have not discovered any inscriptions with the names of the real patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, but they have discovered many ancient tablets which contain information regarding the time period (second millennium BC) during which the patriarchs lived.

**Nuzi Tablets**

Over 3500 Nuzi tablets dated to 1500-1350 BC were written in the Hurrian dialect of Akkadian and discovered at Yorghun Tepe by Chiera and Speiser between 1925 and 1941. The archive reveals customs from the mid-second millennium that relate to the patriarchal narratives. For instance, a childless couple in Nuzi could adopt a servant as an heir. Abram assumed that his servant Eliezer could inherit his estate since Abram was childless (Gen 15:1-3). Legal tablets indicate that an infertile wife could give her maidservant to her husband for the purpose of providing him an heir, who would then be adopted by the primary wife. According to these texts if she later gave birth to her own son, then he would displace the maidservant’s son as the rightful heir. Sarah gave Abram her servant Hagar and she had a son named Ishmael (Gen 16). Later Abram and Sarah had their own son who became the heir: Isaac (Gen 21). Archaeologists discovered Nuzi marriage contracts stipulating that a bride be given a maidservant. Laban gave maidservants to his daughters when they were married (Gen 29:22-24, 28-29).\textsuperscript{23}

The Nuzi tablets reveal that the customs found in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis were actually practiced and were not inventions of the author.

\textsuperscript{22} K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible In Its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1978), 64.

\textsuperscript{23} NIV *Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 52.
Mari Tablets

Over twenty thousand Mari tablets (2081 BC) written in Akkadian were discovered at Tell-Hariri in 1933 by Parrot. These tablets contain the royal archives of the ruler Zimri-Lim. The city of Mari was located on a trade route connecting Sumer to Assyria. The Mari tablets describe the Amorites and their culture. The Amorites raised livestock and lived near the city of Haran where Abram lived for a time (Gen 11:31-12:5). Many of the names in the tablets are similar to the biblical names in Genesis. The tablets mention the towns of Laish (also called Dan; Judg 18) and Hazor (Josh 11:10). 24

Biblical archaeologists have also discovered some places where the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived and visited. Some important places include Ur III, ancient Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cave of Machpelah in the Tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron.

Ur III

Abram left Ur of the Chaldees to go to the promised land (Gen 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh 9:7). Ur was located in ancient Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2, 4). Many archaeologists identified Ur with the modern Tell el-Muqayyar. C. Leonard Wooley excavated this site between 1922 and 1934. The discoveries at Ur (2112-2004 BC) included homes and the ruins of the temple tower (ziggurat) built by Ur-Nammu, the founder of the 3rd dynasty. Archaeologists also found cuneiform tablets showing mathematics along with reading and writing tablets. At the University of Pennsylvania museum in Philadelphia there is an exhibit of gold objects discovered at Ur. The most famous is the gold ram in the thicket (cf. Gen 22).

24 Ibid., 54.
**Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira = Ancient Sodom and Gomorrah?**

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has long been viewed as a legend. The Bible refers to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as an historical event. The OT prophets refer to the destruction of Sodom (Deut 29:23; Isa 13:19; Jer 49:18). Jesus talks about the destruction of Sodom (Matt 10:15) as well as Peter (2 Pet 2:6) and Jude (Jude 7).

Five cities of the plain are mentioned in Genesis 14: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zoar, and Zeboiim. Archaeologists have searched the Dead Sea region for these cities. Genesis 14:3 gives the location of these two wicked cities as the Valley of Siddim (the Salt Sea or Dead Sea). On the east side of the Dead Sea are six river valleys that flow into the Dead Sea.

Remnants of these cities have been found along the Dead Sea. The northern most city is Bab edh-Dhra which many archaeologists believe is ancient Sodom. Going south from Bab edh-Dhra there is the city called Numeira (Gomorrah?). The next city is called Safi (Zoar?). Further south are the cities of Feifa (Admah?) and Khanazir (Zeboiim?). Studies reveal that these cities were abandoned at the same time around 2450-2350 BC.

In 1924 archaeologist William Albright excavated Bab edh-Dhra, searching for Sodom and Gomorrah. He discovered it to be a heavily fortified city. Albright believed that it was one of the biblical cities, but he could not find conclusive evidence to justify his belief. Archaeologists worked at this site in 1965, 1967, and 1973. They found a massive grave site outside the city. Archaeologists determined that a massive fire had destroyed the city. The city lay buried under a coating of ash several feet thick. Charred remains of roofs and posts were discovered along with red bricks which had been burned.

Archaeologist Dr. Bryant Wood believes that a fire began on the roofs of these buildings, and the fire collapsed the roofs into the interior of the buildings. This was the case in every house they excavated. Wood believes that the site of Bab edh-Dhra is the biblical city of Sodom.  

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The Battle for Old Testament History and Archaeology

The Cave of Machpelah in the Tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron

After the death of Sarah, Abraham purchased the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite and he buried her there (Gen 23). Abraham was also buried in this cave after his death by his sons Isaac and Ishmael (Gen 25:9). Isaac was buried in this cave by his sons Jacob and Esau (Gen 35:27-29). Jacob died in Egypt and his body was embalmed and carried to Hebron where he was buried with his fathers (Gen 49:29-50:14). The cave of Machpelah is the burial place of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Sarah (the wife of Abraham), Rebecca (the wife of Isaac; cf Gen 49:31) and Leah (one of the wives of Jacob; cf Gen 49:31), are also buried there. The only one who is missing is Rachel who was buried near Bethlehem. Herod the Great built the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron over the site. The Byzantines and Crusaders turned it into a church, and the Muslims use it as a mosque today. In 1967 rabbi Shlomo Goren was the first Jew to enter the cave of Machpelah. Since then Jews have been severely restricted in visiting the site. If the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob never existed, why would there be a tomb of the patriarchs in Hebron?

ISRAEL IN EGYPT

Minimalist archaeologists have different views regarding the origin of Israel. They do not begin with the Bible as their starting point. They start with archaeological discoveries that mention Israel. The program “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” begins with the Merenptah stele. The Merenptah stele was discovered in 1896 by Petrie at Thebes in Egypt. It dates to around 1207 BC. The Merenptah stele records the first mention of the nation Israel.

Part of the Merenptah stele reads,

The princes are prostrate saying Shalom. Not one of the nine bows lifts his head; Tjehenu is vanquished, Khatti at peace, Canaan is captive with all woe. Ashkelon is conquered, Gezer seized, Yanoam made nonexistent; Israel is wasted, bare of seed, Khor is become a widow for Egypt. All who roamed have been subdued. By the King
of Upper and Lower Egypt, Banere-meramun, Son of Re, Merenptah, Content with Maat, given life like Re every day. 26

Finkelstein and Silberman write,

The Merenptah stele contains the first appearance of the name Israel in any surviving ancient text. This again raises the questions: Who were the Semites in Egypt? Can they be regarded as Israelite in any meaningful sense? No mention of the name Israel has been found in any of the inscriptions or documents connected with the Hyksos period. Nor is it mentioned in later Egyptian inscriptions, or in an extensive fourteenth century BCE cuneiform archive found at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt, whose nearly four hundred letters describe in detail the social, political, and demographic conditions in Canaan at that time. As we will argue in a later chapter, the Israelites emerged only gradually as a distinct group in Canaan beginning at the end of the thirteenth century BCE. There is no recognizable archaeological evidence of Israelite presence in Egypt immediately before that time. 27

The Bible tells us that Joseph was second in command to pharaoh in Egypt (Gen 41:39-46). Genesis 41:46 says that Joseph was 30 years old when he stood before pharaoh. Whitcomb believes that Joseph was born in 1914 BC. So Joseph would have been promoted around 1884 BC. Jacob brought his family to Egypt 430 years before the Exodus (Exod 12:40; Gal 3:17; 1875 BC). So the Bible argues for the existence of Israel in Egypt before the exodus.

Is there any archaeological evidence for the existence of Israel in Egypt? In 1902 Newberry discovered a painting in a tomb at Beni-Hasan. The Beni-Hasan tomb painting which dates from 1900 BC pictures Semites in Egypt. This is an important painting in that it shows that people other than Egyptians lived in Egypt. The Israelites were Semites who lived in Egypt.


27 Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 57.
How long did the Israelites live in Egypt? Conservative evangelical scholars disagree on the length of the Egyptian sojourn.\(^{28}\) The problem is caused by a disagreement over the interpretation of Exodus 12:40-41: “Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years—on that very same day—it came to pass that all the armies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.” The New King James Version follows the Masoretic text reading of Exodus 12:40.

The Masoretic text of Exodus 12:40 is: נְעֵמָה חֵן אֶלֶּה תְמָה בְּכָלָּא עֵשָּׂרְהָא אָשָּׂר חֵמָּה שֵׁלֶשֶׂה. My translation of the text is: “Now the time of dwelling of the children of Israel that dwelt in Egypt was thirty years and four hundred years.” Some of the oldest Hebrew manuscripts hold to the view that the length of time in which the Israelites sojourned in Egypt was 430 years.

The Septuagint text for Exodus 12:40 is: Ἄρθρον μην εξ Αἴγυπτου καὶ ἐν Χαναάν, ἐτῶν τετρακόσια καὶ τριάκοντα. My translation of the Septuagint text of Exodus 12:40 is “And the sojourning of the sons of Israel, while they were dwelling in the land of Egypt and in Canaan, was four hundred and thirty years.”

The key question that must be answered is, does the mention of 430 years designate the amount of time that the Israelites spent in Egypt only (the Masoretic text) or in Canaan and Egypt (the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint, though the order is inverted in the Septuagint)?

To determine the historical date of the events recorded in the Joseph narrative (Gen 37-50), it is important to begin with 1 Kings 6:1. Solomon began his construction of the temple in the fourth year of his reign. First Kings 6:1 says, “And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of

\(^{28}\) Minimalists are not concerned about the biblical time indicators since they reject the historicity of Genesis. The minimalist-maximalist debate centers on how much if any of the patriarchal narratives are true and in which millennium they could have originated.
Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the Lord.” If the fourth year of Solomon’s reign was 996 BC, then the exodus took place in 1446 BC.

Merrill argues for a 1446 BC date for the exodus of Israel from Egypt:

This date of 1446 B.C. is almost universally rejected by those scholars who do not take 1 Kings 6:1 as a literal chronological datum. Most follow the so called “late date,” falling somewhere between 1290 and 1230 B.C. This is based on the assumptions that the city Rameses of Exodus 1:11 was built by the Hebrews for Pharaoh Rameses II (1290-1224) and that Israel was in Canaan by 1220 B.C. in order to have been mentioned in the Merenptah Stele (1220 B.C.). Allowing for some time in wilderness wandering, the Exodus, probably, in this view, occurred around 1250 B.C. A recent discussion supporting these arguments is given by Roland de Vaux. He admits that if one were to take the biblical chronology of 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26 seriously, he must date the Exodus in the mid fifteenth century. It is only by permitting archaeological evidence to have priority over clear biblical evidence that any date later than the mid fifteenth century can stand.”

God predicted that Abram’s descendants would endure a 400-year captivity in a land that was not theirs (Egypt). In Genesis 15:13: “Then He said to Abram, “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs (italics mine), and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward, they shall come out with great possessions.” This prediction given by God in the Abrahamic Covenant is a strong argument for Israel being in Egypt for 400 years rather than just 215 years. The Hebrew word for “afflict” (חנן) is the same word used in Exodus 1:11-12 to describe Egypt’s oppression of Israel. The Hebrew text of Exodus 12:40 is

29 De Vaux, Early History of Israel, 388-92.

preferable to the LXX reading, since Exodus 12:41 clearly indicates that the “selfsame day” constituted the 430th anniversary of the time when Jacob and his family first entered Egypt. This would mean that 30 years had elapsed from the time of Jacob’s entrance into Egypt until the oppression of the Israelites began in Egypt. The events of Genesis 46-50 along with the first verses of Exodus (Exod 1:1-7) would fit into this 30-year time frame. The 400 years of Egyptian bondage began when the pharaoh (a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph) set taskmasters over the Israelites to afflict them with their burdens (Exod 1:8-11).

**THE HISTORICITY OF THE EXODUS**

The PBS program “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” rejected the historicity of the exodus as recorded in the Bible. Paula Apsell says,

The experts we interviewed who are among the foremost biblical scholars in the world, tell us that there is no evidence to support the account of Exodus as described in the Bible—a massive outpouring of some 600,000 men and their families. However, these scholars don’t deny the possibility that an exodus in some form might have occurred. In fact, many of them think that a smaller departure from Egypt did take place. There’s another twist in this view of the Exodus that may surprise people. Many biblical scholars now think that it wasn’t Israelite slaves but rather Canaanite slaves who escaped from Egypt. As these former slaves made their way back to Canaan, they stopped in a place the Bible calls Midian, where they underwent some type of religious transformation, adopting a god perhaps known as Yahu. In our film, through dramatic reenactments, we show these former slaves returning to Canaan, where they tell their story of liberation, and of a redeeming God, to the people they find there, the ancient Israelites. Many biblical scholars think this was a critical juncture...

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in the formation of the identity of the ancient Israelites and their belief in Yahweh, who became their one God.\textsuperscript{32}

Finkelstein and Silberman write,

There is simply no such evidence at the supposed time of the Exodus in the thirteenth century BCE. The conclusion—that the Exodus did not happen at the time and in the manner described in the Bible—seems irrefutable when we examine the evidence at specific sites where the children of Israel were said to have camped for extended periods during the wandering in the desert (Numbers 33) and where some archaeological indication—if present—would almost certainly be found.\textsuperscript{33}

The book of Exodus gives the historical record of the exodus of Israel from Egypt. Biblical archaeologists have not discovered any evidence outside of the Bible for the exodus of Israel from Egypt. It would be amazing if archaeologists would discover an Egyptian record about the destruction of the Egyptian pharaoh and army in the Red Sea. But think about it. Why would the pharaohs or Egyptians keep any records about the destruction of their pharaoh and the Egyptian army by a foreign “god” (Jehovah of the Bible)? It would be embarrassing to record that over two million Israelite slaves escaped from Egypt after a series of ten plagues were brought against their nation by Jehovah. The pharaohs of Egypt kept records of their great achievements. These achievements are found written in hieroglyphics in the ancient tombs of the pharaohs. They erased records of past failures. Maximalist archaeologists and conservative scholars would reject the late date of the exodus given by Finkelstein. The reason there is no archaeological evidence for an exodus in the thirteenth century BCE is that it did not happen at that time.


\textsuperscript{33} Finkelstein and Silberman, \textit{The Bible Unearthed}, 63.
THE HISTORICITY OF THE CONQUEST OF JERICHO AND CANAAN

Finkelstein and Silberman doubt that the conquest of Canaan ever happened. They write,

How could an army in rags, traveling with women, children, and the aged, emerging after decades from the desert, possibly mount an effective invasion? How could such a disorganized rabble overcome the great fortresses of Canaan, with their professional armies and well trained corps of chariots?

Did the conquest of Canaan really happen? Is this central saga of the Bible—and of the subsequent history of Israel—history or myth? Despite the fact that the ancient cities of Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, Lachish, Hazor, and nearly all the others mentioned in the conquest story have been located and excavated, the evidence for a historical conquest of Canaan by the Israelites is, as we will see, weak.\(^\text{34}\)

Joshua describes the conquest of the city of Jericho in Joshua 6. For six straight days the Israelites marched around the city one time on each day. Then on the seventh day the Israelites marched around Jericho seven times, the priests blew their trumpets, the people shouted, and the walls of the city of Jericho fell down flat (Josh 6:20). The Israelites destroyed everyone inside except Rahab, her father, her mother, and her brothers (Josh 6:23). Then they burned the city of Jericho with fire (Josh 6:24).

John Garstang excavated Jericho in the 1930s. He believed that he found evidence of the destruction of Jericho by Joshua. In the 1950s Kathleen Kenyon excavated at Jericho and argued that Garstang was wrong. She believed that the city was destroyed around 1550 BC (about 150 years before the conservative 1400 BC date for the destruction of Jericho by Joshua and the Israelites).

\(^{34}\) Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 72-73.
Finkelstein and Silberman reject the biblical account of the destruction of Jericho by the Israelites. They write,

As with the Exodus story, archaeology has uncovered a dramatic discrepancy between the Bible and the situation within Canaan at the suggested date of the conquest, between 1230 and 1220 BCE. Although we know that a group named Israel was already present somewhere in Canaan by 1207 BCE, the evidence on the general and political and military landscape of Canaan suggests that a lightning invasion by this group would have been impractical and unlikely in the extreme.\(^{35}\)

Conservative biblical scholars and archaeologists would admit that there is a problem if one is searching for an archaeological destruction of Jericho at that late date. The conservative date for the destruction of Jericho is around 1400 BC. Wood writes,

A late Bronze I conquest theory asserts that Jericho was conquered by Joshua in the latter part of Late Bronze I at about 1400 B.C. This theory is based on the presence of Late Bronze I pottery at the site. Also, scarabs of Egyptian pharaohs Hatshepsut, Thutmose III and Amenhotep III have been found there. These scarabs indicate a habitation site during the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty, or during the Late Bronze I. All of this suggests that the catastrophic destruction of Jericho City IV took place at the close of the late Bronze I (about 1400 B.C.).\(^{36}\)

The Bible indicates that Joshua utterly destroyed all the cities of the Canaanite kings in the north. Joshua and the Israelites burned Hazor with fire (Josh 11:11-13). “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” also looks at the destruction of Hazor. Amnon Ben-Tor and Sharon Zuckerman discuss their different interpretations of the archaeological remains of Hazor. Minimalist Zuckerman views the remains as evidence of an internal social revolt of Hazor’s poor and oppressed against the elite of Hazor.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 76.

\(^{36}\) Archaeological Study Bible, 314.
Ben-Tor argues that the remains confirm an Israelite conquest:

There is evidence of a massive destruction. In Hazor, wherever you come down to the end of the Canaanite strata, you come upon this destruction. It is an unbelievable destruction...it left behind a thick debris of ashes. There was a terrible fire in the Canaanite palace. So much so that the bricks vitrified and some of the clay vessels melted and some stones exploded because of the fire....We can clearly say that the temperature was more than 1200 degrees centigrade. A normal fire is about half, about 600 or 700 degrees, but in the afternoon the wind is unbelievable....put these together and you'll get this kind of fire with very intense heat....Hazor was once the head of all those kingdoms, the most important of the Canaanite city states (Joshua 11:10).37

THE IDENTITY OF THE ISRAELITES

Various archaeologists in the program “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” discuss the identity of the Israelites. An archaeological survey was done of the central hill country of Israel. Amnon Ben-Tor, Israel Finkelstein, William Dever, Peter Machinist, and Abraham Faust discuss the significance of this survey. The archaeologists differ on whether the remains show a distinct Israelite society or just a continuation of Canaanite culture.

Finkelstein says that in 1920 Albrecht Alt suggested that the Israelites were pastoralists who wandered with their flocks in fixed seasonal migrations between the fringe of the desert and the settled lands of Canaan. He said that it was assumed that the Israelites were scattered groups of arriving pastoralists rather than a unified army. George Mendenhall believes that the ancient Israelites were peasant rebels who fled from the cities of Canaan to the highlands. Norman Gottwald argues in his book The Tribes of Yahweh that the new ideas of equality were imported into Canaan by a small group of people who came from Egypt and settled in the highlands. This group may have been influenced by unorthodox Egyptian ideas on religion, like

those that stimulated the monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten in the fourteenth century BCE.  
Finkelstein and Silberman write,

The process that we describe here is, in fact, the opposite of what we have in the Bible: the emergence of early Israel was an outcome of the collapse of the Canaanite culture, not its cause. And most of the Israelites did not come from outside Canaan—they emerged from within it. There was no mass Exodus from Egypt, there was no violent conquest of Canaan. Most of the people who formed early Israel were local people—the same people whom we see in the highlands throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. The early Israelites were—irony of ironies—themselves originally Canaanites!

Were the Israelites really just Canaanites? Mark Smith writes,

Despite the long regnant model that the Canaanites and Israelites were people of fundamentally different culture, archaeological data now casts doubt on this view. The material culture of the region exhibits numerous common points between Israelites and Canaanites in the Iron I period (ca. 1200-1000). The record would suggest that the Israelite culture largely overlapped with and derived from Canaanite culture .... In short, Israelite culture was largely Canaanite in nature. Given the information available, one cannot maintain a radical cultural separation between Canaanites and Israelites for the Iron I period.

Biblical scholars and archaeologists would reject the view that the ancient Israelites were Canaanites. The Israelites were the descendants of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Genesis tells us that Jacob had 12 sons who became the twelve

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39 Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 118.

The Battle for Old Testament History and Archaeology  47

tribes of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph (his sons became equal with his brothers: Ephraim and Manasseh), and Benjamin (Gen 48-49).

THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

Wellhausen argues in his book *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* that the religion of ancient Israel was polytheistic and that monotheism was a late development. The minimalists in the documentary “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” argue that ancient Israelites were polytheists. Dever claims that he has discovered evidence that YHWH had a wife named Asherah. Asherah was a Canaanite idol mentioned in the Ras Shamra texts as a goddess of the sea and consort of El. Dever states that archaeologists have discovered thousands of clay figurines of the female goddess Asherah but no images of YHWH. Dever concludes in the program, “This is awkward for some people, the notion that Israelite religion was not exclusively monotheistic. But we know that it wasn’t. Monotheism was a late development. Not until the Babylonian Exile and beyond does Israelite and Judean religion—Judaism—become monotheistic.”

Mark Smith writes,

The change in the scholarly understanding of early Israel’s culture has led to the second major change in perspective, which involves the nature of the Yahwistic cult. With the change in perspective concerning Israel’s Canaanite background, long held notions about Israelite religion are slowly eroding. Baal and Asherah are part of Israel’s Canaanite heritage, and the process of the emergence of Israelite monotheism was an issue of Israel’s breaking with its own Canaanite past and not simply of avoiding Canaanite neighbors. Although the Biblical witness accurately represented the existence of Israelite syncretism with the religious practices of

41 Dever, “Archaeology of the Hebrew Bible.”
Canaanite neighbors, as some biblical passages depict it, as it was an instance of old Israelite religion.\textsuperscript{42}

The Israelites rejected their worship of the one true God Jehovah and worshipped Baal and Asherah on many occasions. Jehovah punished Israel when they worshipped these idols. The Moabites worshipped Baal, and their women led the Israelite men astray as they worshipped Baal and were involved in sexual immorality (Num 25:1-3). God judged the Israelites with a plague that killed 24,000 (Num 25:9). During the period of Judges the Israelites worshipped Baal and Asherah (Judg 2:13). As a result of their idolatry God judged the nation and various foreign nations invaded Israel and enslaved them (Judg 2:14-15). Ahab and Jezebel led the northern kingdom of Israel to worship Baal. There were 450 priests of Baal (1 Kgs 18:19). On Mount Carmel, Elijah challenged the Israelites to choose between Baal and Jehovah (1 Kgs 18). Baal was the god of the storm, but he did not send fire from heaven. Jehovah sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. The text of 1 Kings 18 is a polemic to show the superiority of Jehovah over Baal. The discovery of clay figurines of Asherah in Israel by archaeologists does not prove that the Israelites were polytheists before they became monotheists. It is true that Israel struggled with idolatry from the very beginning. The Israelites worshipped the golden calf when God was giving Moses the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai (Exod 32). The nation struggled with idolatry and syncretism throughout its history. After the Babylonian exile the nation was more monotheistic. But the minimalists have neglected many texts in the OT which emphasize the monotheistic religion that Israel practiced from the beginning.

Finkelstein and Silberman believe that monotheism began during the time of Josiah:

Before the crystallization of the kingdom of Judah as a fully bureaucratic state, religious idea were diverse and dispersed. Thus, as we have mentioned, there was the royal cult in the Jerusalem temple, there were the countless fertility and ancestor cults in the countryside, and there was the widespread mixing of

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 7.
the worship of YHWH with that of other gods .... In a period of no more than a few decades in the late eighth and early seventh century B.C.E. the monotheistic tradition of Judeo-Christian civilization was born. That is a big claim—to be able to pinpoint the birth of the modern religious consciousness, especially when its central scripture, the Bible, places the birth of monotheism hundreds of years earlier.... Sometime in the eighth century BCE there arose an increasingly vocal school of thought that insisted that the cults of the countryside were sinful and that YHWH alone should be worshipped.43

During the reign of Josiah, the book of the law of the Lord was discovered in the temple by Hilkiah, the high priest (2 Kgs 22). In the program “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” Coogan argues that it was the book of Deuteronomy that was discovered in the temple. Coogan believes that this D source document was then used by Josiah to introduce monotheism to Israel. Josiah led the nation of Judah back to the worship of the one true God, but Israel did not learn monotheism for the first time under Josiah.

THE HISTORICITY OF DAVID AND SOLOMON

Minimalist archaeologists have called into question the historicity of David and Solomon and their united kingdom. Finkelstein writes,

Yet many of the archaeological props that once bolstered the historical basis of the David and Solomon narratives have recently been called into question. The actual extent of the Davidic empire is hotly debated. Digging in Jerusalem has failed to produce evidence that it was a great city in David or Solomon’s time. And the monuments ascribed to Solomon are now most plausibly connected with other kings. Thus a reconsideration of the evidence has enormous implications. For if there were no patriarchs, no Exodus, no conquest of Canaan—and no prosperous united monarchy under David and Solomon—can we say that

43 Finkelstein and Silberman, The Bible Unearthed, 246-47.
early biblical Israel, as described in the Five Books of Moses and the books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel, ever existed at all?44

Tell Dan Stele

In the summer of 1993, Dr. Avraham Biran and his team were excavating a site labeled Tell Dan, located in northern Galilee at the base of Mt. Hermon. He discovered in the ruins a stele or stone slab containing Aramaic inscriptions. The stele contained thirteen lines of writing, but none of the sentences was complete. Some of the lines contained only three letters while the widest contained fourteen. The letters that remained were clearly engraved and easy to read. Two of the lines included the phrases “The King of Israel” and “House of David.”

The Tell Dan stele is the first ancient reference outside of the Bible to mention David. It dates to about 820 BC. In this inscription, Hazael, King of Aram, boasts, “I killed Joram, son of Ahab, King of Israel, and I killed Ahaziah, son of Jehoram, king of the House of David.” Second Kings 8:28-29 records Joram’s being injured in battle against Hazael. But the Bible tells us that Joram was later actually slain by Jehu (2 Kgs 9:14-26). The Arameans knew he was injured in battle and mistakenly assumed that he died later of his battle wounds. Hazael was victorious over Israel and Judah and erected this stele to celebrate the defeat of the two kings.

In 1994 two more pieces were found with inscriptions which refer to Jehoram, the son of Ahab, ruler over Israel, and Ahaziah, ruler over the House of David or Judah. These names and facts correspond to the account given in 2 Kings 8-9.

The find has confirmed a number of facts. First, the use of the term “House of David” implies that there was a Davidic dynasty that ruled Israel. Here is external affirmation that King David did really exist. Second, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were prominent political kingdoms. Critics viewed them as insignificant states.

Dr. Bryant Wood summarizes the importance of this find in this way: “In our day, most scholars, archaeologists and biblical

44 Ibid., 124.
scholars would take a very critical view of the historical accuracy of many of the accounts in the Bible. Many scholars have said there never was a David or a Solomon, and now we have a stele that actually mentions David."

Archaeologist Bryant Wood, director of the Associates for Biblical Research, made this point regarding the discovery of the name “House of David” on the stele from Tell Dan:

We know he (David) is a historical figure because he is mentioned in the Bible, but that is not enough for scholars. They need evidence outside of the Bible. So biblical archaeology can play a very important role in verifying the truth of Scripture in the face of the criticism that we are receiving today from modern scholarship.

King David’s Palace

Second Samuel 5 tells how David conquered Jerusalem. David’s men climbed up through the water shaft to conquer the city. Archaeologists have discovered this water shaft that the men used. Second Samuel 5:9 says, “Then David dwelt in the stronghold and called it the City of David.” Second Samuel 5:11 says, “Then Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David and cedar trees and carpenters and masons. And they built David a house.” In the program “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” Eilat Mazar takes the viewer on a tour of the remains of what she believes is David’s Palace in Jerusalem. Mazar says,

Such a huge structure can only be a royal structure. The question is: what kind of structure is it—a fortress, or a palace or a temple? We conclude that it’s a palace because the Bible reports very clearly that such a palace was built. We showed it’s not a Canaanite fortress, and we have no indication that another fortress was built. And we know there was a temple on the Temple Mount (north of the site) from that period.

45 Qtd in Price, The Stones Cry Out, 28.
Solomon’s Gates at Hazor, Gezer, and Megiddo

Archaeologists have discovered some gates at Hazor, Gezer, and Megiddo which have a similar design. Maximalist archaeologists believe that these gates were built by Solomon. First Kings 9:15 says, “And this is the reason for the labor force which King Solomon raised to build the house of the Lord, his own house, the Millo, the wall of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer.” Yigael Yadin, an Israeli archaeologist who worked at Hazor, was convinced that the gates of all three cities were built by Solomon’s architects from identical blueprints.

But Finkelstein, who recently excavated at Megiddo, argues that Yadin leaned too heavily on the Bible. Citing renewed analysis of the architectural styles and pottery found at the site, Finkelstein and Silberman conclude that the structures date to decades after the death of Solomon.46

Finkelstein and Silberman’s revisionist views are contested by other leading archaeologists. The current excavator at Hazor, Amnon ben Tor of Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the University of Arizona’s Dever, who excavated Gezer, remain convinced that pottery and other evidence point to the 10th century BC and presumably Solomonic construction of all three cities.

Solomon’s Temple

First Kings 6:1 says, “And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the Lord.” The 480th year after the exodus would be 966 BC. First Kings 6:14 says, “So Solomon built the temple and finished it.” This first temple built in Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 BC (2 Kngs 25). Archaeologists have searched but have not found any evidence for Solomon’s temple

46 Finkelstein and Silberman, The Bible Unearthed, 141-42.
on the temple mount. Today the Dome of the Rock (the Mosque of Omar) is located on the temple mount. Jews are not permitted to go there. Jews worship instead at the Western Wall. Archaeologists have discovered an ancient receipt for three shekels which were donated to the “Temple of YHWH.” This receipt dated to the 800s BC is the oldest known reference outside of the Bible to King Solomon’s temple.47 In “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” Lawrence Stager gives a tour of the Syrian temple of Ain Dara. Stager believes this is the best archaeological model for understanding and reconstructing Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem.

CONCLUSION

The battle for Old Testament history and archaeology is a battle for the Bible and the historicity of the people, places, and events described in the Bible. Archaeological discoveries have confirmed the historical accuracy of the Bible. The Bible is a source of historical information and is itself an ancient document that must be consulted in order to understand the ancient Near East. Archaeology does have its limits. Archaeology does not prove that the Bible is inspired or inerrant. Archaeologists must study and interpret the ancient manuscripts, inscriptions, and artifacts of the past. Presuppositions affect interpretations. Minimalists assume that the Bible is not a reliable historical source of information. As a result they have different interpretations regarding the archaeological discoveries. They believe that absence of evidence is evidence of absence. They do not believe that the exodus or conquest of Canaan occurred because they have not discovered any archaeological proof for these events. Biblical archaeologists start with the presupposition that the Bible is inspired and inerrant and therefore historically true and reliable. Bible chronology influences how one views a particular archaeological site. For instance, biblical archaeologists believe that there is evidence to show that the walls of Jericho fell

around 1400 BC. How did the walls fall down? Archaeologists do not know the answer to that question unless they read the book of Joshua. Archaeology does not give us all the answers that we want, but we can learn much from the study of biblical archaeology.

**APPENDIX: ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERIODS**

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