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A Very Short Introduction

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To my family and my fellow archaeologists

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Introduction

The field of biblical archaeology is flourishing today, with popular interest at an all-time high. Millions of viewers watch television documentaries on the Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, and the so-called Lost Tomb of Jesus. Major publishing houses have published competing Bible atlases, and the popularizing magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* reaches a large audience. And every year at Easter, Charlton Heston appears on television as Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie *The Ten Commandments*, raising his arms high to part the waters of the Red Sea so that the Hebrews may cross to safety.

Biblical archaeology is a subset of the larger field of Syro-Palestinian archaeology—which is conducted throughout the region encompassed by modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Specifically, it is archaeology that sheds light on the stories, descriptions, and discussions in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament from the early second millennium BCE, the time of Abraham and the Patriarchs, through the Roman period in the early first millennium CE.

Despite the fact that biblical archaeologists began their excavations in the Holy Land more than a hundred years ago—with a Bible in one hand and a trowel in the other—major questions still remain



1. Israel and Judah from 930 to 720 BCE.

unanswered, including whether there was really an exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt and the extent of David and Solomon's empires. Other unresolved issues involve the specific details of daily life during the period of the Divided Kingdoms, after the time of Solomon, and the difference between Canaanite and Israelite material culture during the Early Iron Age.

Most biblical archaeologists do not deliberately set out to either prove or disprove elements of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament through archaeology. Instead, they investigate the material culture of the lands and time periods mentioned in the Bible, and the people, places, and events discussed in those ancient texts, in order to bring them to life and to reconstruct the culture and history of the region. This is particularly evident in New Testament archaeology, where the excavation of cities like Caesarea, Capernaum, and Sepphoris has shed light on the social, religious, and geographic situation in the time before, during, and after the life of Jesus.

However, biblical archaeology has generally provided more relevant information that can be correlated with the narratives of the Hebrew Bible than with those of the New Testament. There are several reasons for this disparity. The events depicted in the Hebrew Bible occurred over a much longer time period than those depicted in the New Testament—over millennia rather than over approximately two hundred years. Moreover, the stories and events described in the Hebrew Bible occurred throughout a much larger geographic area than those of the New Testament. The entire Middle East and North Africa provide the backdrop for the stories of the Hebrews, whereas the drama of the early Christians played out mainly in Syro-Palestine and to a lesser extent in ancient Greece and Italy.

For these two reasons of space and time, there are many more potentially relevant Old Testament archaeological sites than New Testament sites. Perhaps of equal importance is the fact

that the Hebrew Bible often describes events such as battles and destructions, and solid structures such as buildings and inscriptions carved in stone. These leave behind physical remnants that tend to endure for long periods of time, whereas the narratives of the New Testament more often involved language and ideas that have enormous social impact but leave few physical artifacts that can be discovered by digging. Nonetheless, biblical archaeology has provided wonderful insights into both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, and correlations with both (see table 1, page 6).

For many scholars, the Bible is an important source of data that helps to shed light on ancient life and practices. Leaving aside for the moment the religious significance and the questions of the historical accuracy of the text, there is no question that the Bible is a historical document of seminal importance. It is an ancient source that often contains abundant details and descriptions of the Holy Land in antiquity. It is a source that can be used—with caution—to shed light on the ancient world, just as Syro-Palestinian archaeologists use Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, or Neo-Babylonian inscriptions covering the same time period.

This use of ancient sources by biblical archaeologists finds its parallel in the practices of Classical archaeologists who study the texts of the people who lived in ancient Greece and Italy and of New World archaeologists who can now read the texts of the pre-Columbian peoples of the Americas. Classical archaeologists sometimes compare their findings in the field to the Greek and Roman texts, in order to discuss questions such as the nature of the Periclean Building Program or about the plague that ravaged Athens in 430 BCE, while those specializing in the Bronze Age will cautiously use the Homeric texts. In a similar manner, biblical archaeologists often, and with appropriate care, compare their field findings to the biblical account in order to discuss questions concerning David, Solomon, the Divided Kingdoms, and so on.