The Bible and Archaeology

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Can You Believe the Bible?

William Ramsay didn't set out to prove the Bible's accuracy. In fact, the young Oxford graduate and budding scholar set sail in 1879 from England for Asia Minor convinced that, based on his university studies, the New Testament—and the book of Acts in particular— was largely a hoax. After all, his professors had taught him that the Bible had been written much later than it claimed to be, so its stories had been fabricated long after the fact and weren't to be taken seriously.

The focus of his work was ancient Roman culture. But the more he dug into it, literally and figuratively, the more he came to see that the myriad of tiny details in the book of Acts—place names, topography, officials' titles, administrative boundaries, customs and even specific structures—fit perfectly with newly discovered historical and archaeological finds. He was gradually convinced that, to use his own words, "in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth."

Contrary to all his earlier education, he was forced to conclude that Luke, the author of Acts, was "a historian of the first rank" and that "not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense . . . This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

In an outstanding academic career Ramsay was honored with doctorates from nine universities and eventually knighted for his contributions to modern scholarship. He shocked the academic world when in one of his books he announced that, because of the incontrovertible evidence he had discovered for the truthfulness of the Bible, he had become a Christian. Several of his works on New Testament history are considered classics. When confronted with the evidence of years of travel and study, Sir William Ramsay learned what many others before him and since have been forced to acknowledge: When we objectively examine the evidence for the Bible's accuracy and veracity, the only conclusion we can reach is that the Bible is true.

The evidence from archaeology is only one proof of Scripture's accuracy, and that's the focus of this series of articles. We offer you a sampling of the evidence that's available—documentation showing that details of the people, places and events described in the Bible, many of them mentioned only in passing, have been verified by archaeologists and historians. Many excellent books have been published in recent years that verify the dependability of Scripture, and no doubt more will follow as new discoveries come to light.

What are the implications of this for you? All the evidence in the world does us no good if we are not willing to believe the Bible enough to put it to the ultimate test—that of doing what it tells us to do. James, the half brother of Jesus, reminds us that mere belief is not enough, because even the demons believe. Instead he tells us we must put our beliefs into action if we are to please God (James 2:19-26).

In The Good News we regularly offer articles such as those in this ebook to help build your faith. But be sure that you don't neglect the articles that show you how to put your faith and belief into action. God is interested to see how you respond to the truth He makes known to you. Ultimately that is the far more important test.

This is a compilation of the 24-part series presented in the Good News magazine over the past several years. This document is only available as an ebook.

How Archaeology Confirms the Bibilical Record

"I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out," said Jesus (Luke 19:40). He was referring to what would happen if His disciples did not bear testimony of Him.

The original disciples aren't around to provide their eyewitness accounts of Jesus Christ, but we do have the inspired Word of God, which they, along with many others, wrote.

Significantly enough, we also have the testimony of stones that really can bear witness to the veracity and inspiration of God's Word. The physical evidence unearthed by present-day scientists can and does speak to us through biblical archaeology.

Archae, which comes from the Greek, means "ancient," and ology, which comes from the Greek logia, means "science." Archaeology, then, is the scientific study of ancient things.

Unearthing the origins of archaeology

Englishman Flinders Petrie is generally considered the individual who put archaeological methodology on a scientific footing. He is credited with transforming archaeology from a treasure hunt into a disciplined search for information about the past. It was not until the 19th century that scientific methods were rigorously applied to excavations of historical sites.

A curious fact of history is that the person who indirectly contributed to this process was not a scientist but the French emperor and conqueror Napoleon Bonaparte. During his conquests of Europe and the Middle East, Napoleon arrived in Egypt in the late 1700s hoping to build the Suez Canal and drastically reduce the navigation time for the trade route from France to India. In Egypt, before a battle in the vicinity of the famous pyramids of Gizeh, he told his soldiers, "Forty centuries are looking down upon you from these pyramids."

His inquisitive mind led him to study the Egyptian culture and try to decipher strange drawings he saw in the ancient monuments. For that purpose, he brought along 175 French scholars and researchers, and together they set up an institute in Egypt to study the writings and ancient relics of the area.

The deciphering of the Egyptian hieroglyphics (a word meaning priestly or sacred writings) can be attributed mostly to a young scientist of that time, Jean François Champollion. Accurate translations were made possible largely by the discovery in 1799 of a large black basalt rock by French soldiers at the town of Rosetta. Later to be known as the Rosetta Stone, it bore a trilingual inscription in Old Egyptian hieroglyphic, demotic (a later, simplified form of Egyptian hieroglyphics) and Greek. With this stone as a key, Champollion in 1822 could finally decipher the ancient hieroglyphics.

The deciphering of the Egyptian hieroglyphics brought the culture of the Pharaohs to light, and the educated classes of Europe gained insight into this fascinating subject. Soon, many amateur archaeologists were on their way to fame and fortune, finding fabulous monuments

and other treasures. Museums throughout Europe and America vied with each other to house these marvelous finds. The treasure-laden tomb of Tutankhamen, discovered in 1922, was one of the most spectacular. Many early archaeologists would be honored for their efforts and would become a part of history in their own right.

Deciphering ancient writing

Elsewhere in the region, strange writings on monuments and other objects were waiting to be deciphered. Curious scratches, resembling bird footprints, were found on thousands of hardened clay tablets. Initially, some scientists thought they were decorations rather than writing. Since the marks had apparently been made with a wedgelike knife in soft clay, the experts called them cuneiform, or letterforms made by cunei, Latin for "wedges."

The credit for the deciphering of cuneiform would go mostly to an agent of the British government, Henry C. Rawlinson, stationed in Persia. He began a systematic study of cuneiform writing found on the Behistun Rock inscription, sometimes known as the "Rosetta Stone of cuneiform."

Thousands of years earlier, Darius the Great, king of Persia, had on the face of this 1,700-foot cliff overlooking a valley engraved an account of his exploits. The inscription appeared in three scripts: Persian, Elamite and Babylonian in the cuneiform style of writing.

Over a period of two years, Rawlinson traveled to the site and made the perilous climb, dangling from a rope while painstakingly transcribing the inscription. By 1847, he had deciphered cuneiform writing, opening understanding of Babylonian culture and history to the world. For his efforts, Rawlinson received a knighthood from Queen Victoria in 1855.

Digging up forgotten cities

Another young British subject, Austen Henry Layard, drew inspiration from such discoveries and the fame it had brought men like Champollion and Rawlinson. Layard began digging in Iraq, home of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires thousands of years before. He unearthed great cities
mentioned in the Bible, including the ancient Assyrian capital, Nineveh, and Calah. Many of his finds, including enormous winged bulls and other important Babylonian and Assyrian artifacts, made their way to the British Museum. He, too, was knighted by Queen Victoria.

Not to be outdone by the French and British, German archaeologists also began their quest for riches and fame. One such explorer, Heinrich Schliemann, began searching for the legendary city of Troy, described by the ancient Greek poet Homer. Believing Homer's sagas to be pure imagination, contemporaries ridiculed Schliemann's efforts, thinking him to be on a fanciful search. But, incredibly enough, heeding the descriptions in Homer's Iliad and those by other Greek writers, Schliemann began to excavate. In 1871, he found the remains of the ancient city of Troy.

Following in the footsteps of these dashing adventurers came the patient archaeologists who would study and classify these discoveries in a systematic way, giving birth to the scientific

methodology of field archaeology.

The age of skepticism

Unfortunately, the zeal for fame and treasure of many of these early archaeologists also led to unfounded claims of the discoveries of biblical sites. Some of these claims, such as the supposed discovery of King Solomon's mines and David's tomb, were later proved false. Seeds of doubt began to be planted regarding the accuracy of the biblical account.

The 20th century inherited the skepticism of the preceding hundred years. Charles Darwin and others, espousing theories of evolution, had posited explanations for the origin and development of living creatures apart from a divine Creator. Such notions encouraged a questioning of the historicity of the Bible.

Also strong in Europe was the thinking inspired by Karl Marx, who in an economic, materialistic interpretation of history, discounted God and miracles. Many scholars ridiculed the biblical accounts as myth. The Bible became fair game for higher criticism; a tugging match ensued between believers in the inspiration and accuracy of the Bible and scoffers.

Biblical and theological scholars of the day declared the Bible was more recent in origin than it claimed; some argued the people of the Old Testament did not even know how to read and write. Some scholars concluded that most of the Old Testament was little more than myth.

Authors Norman Geisler and Paul Feinberg observe: "Perhaps the best example of those who hold the 'reason over revelation' view are known as 'liberals' or 'higher critics.' Roughly speaking, this refers to a theological movement that sprung from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European thought. It was influenced by Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, who concluded by human reason that parts or all of the Bible are not a revelation from God. Other higher critics have included men such as Jean Astruc (1684-1766) and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).

"In contrast to the historic, orthodox view that the Bible is the Word of God, liberals believe that the Bible merely contains the Word of God. When they apply the canons of human reason or modern scholarship to the Bible they feel that some parts of it are 'contradictory,' and others are simply myths or fables. Some Old Testament stories are rejected by these critics because the events seemed to be 'immoral'" (Introduction to Philosophy, a Christian Perspective, 1980, p. 261).

Rejecting the divine inspiration of the Bible, archaeologists from liberal biblical institutes allowed themselves to be influenced by the age of skepticism in theology. Consciously or unconsciously, they became biased against the biblical account.

Skeptical of fall of Jericho

An example of such bias surfaced recently in the matter of dating the fall of Jericho. According to the biblical record, Jericho was destroyed by the Israelites under Joshua when they began their conquest of the promised land. However, excavations of the site of Jericho led some-most

notably, renowned British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon-to reject the biblical version.

In Biblical Archaeology Review, archaeologist Bryant Wood explains the earlier antibiblical view: "The archaeological evidence conflicted with the Biblical account-indeed, disproved it. Based on [archaeologist Kathleen] Kenyon's conclusions, Jericho has become the parade example of the difficulties encountered in attempting to correlate the findings of archaeology with the Biblical account of a military conquest of Canaan. Scholars by and large have written off the
Biblical record as so much folklore and religious rhetoric. And this is where the matter has stood for the past 25 years" (Bryant Wood, Biblical Archaeology Review, March-April, 1990, p. 49).

Evidence reexamined

Yet a reevaluation of Kenyon's work showed that her conclusions challenging biblical chronology were suspect, while the biblical account gained the strongest supporting evidence. Wood observes that Kenyon's "thoroughgoing excavation methods and detailed reporting of her findings, however, did not carry over into her analytical work. When the evidence is critically examined there is no basis for her contention that City IV [the level of the city that was thought to correspond to Joshua's time] was destroyed . . . in the mid-16th century B.C.E. [before the Christian era]" (ibid., p. 57).

Time magazine added the following: "Over the past three decades, the consensus has gone against the biblical version [of the fall of Jericho]. The late British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon established in the 1950s that while the ancient city was indeed destroyed, it happened around 1550 B.C., some 150 years before Joshua could have shown up. But archaeologist Bryant Wood . . . claims that Kenyon was wrong. Based on a re-evaluation of her research, Wood says that the city's walls could have come tumbling down at just the right time to match the biblical account . . . Says Wood: 'It looks to me as though the biblical stories are correct' (Time, March 5, 1990, p. 43).

And so, the lively debate regarding the Bible's accuracy continues between conservative and liberal archaeologists.

Discoveries verify biblical accounts

As the 20th century has progressed, several archaeological finds verifying the biblical record have come to light. In the early 1900s, German excavators under Robert Koldewey mapped the ancient capital of Babylon and found that it closely corresponded to the biblical description. Egyptian history and culture generally matched the biblical accounts.

The archaeologist's spade has uncovered evidence of other ancient peoples mentioned in Scripture. One such example is the Hittite kingdom, mentioned only in the Bible, which had been dismissed by many critics as mythological. As Gleason Archer mentions: "The references [in the Bible] to the Hittites were treated with incredulity and condemned as mere fiction on the part of late authors of the Torah" (A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, 1974, p. 165). Yet, excavations in Syria and Turkey revealed many Hittite monuments and documents. These discoveries proved the Hittites to have been a mighty nation, with an empire extending from

Asia Minor to parts of Israel.

Also important was the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, written in ancient Hebrew script. The scrolls were found in caves near the Dead Sea in 1947. Some of them are books of the Old Testament written more than 100 years before Christ's time. Nevertheless, questions raised by earlier critics about the Bible's authenticity have shaken the faith of many.

Added dimension in understanding

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains: "There were nineteenth-century scholars who were convinced that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and perhaps even Moses were simply imaginary creations of later Israelite authors. But archaeology has put these persons in a real world. As a result, a scholar such as J[ohn] Bright, after devoting thirty-six pages to the subject, can write, 'the Bible's picture of the patriarchs is deeply rooted in history' . . . Archaeology supplies means for understanding many of the biblical situations[;] it adds the dimension of reality to pictures that otherwise would be strange and somewhat unreal, and therefore it provides an element of credibility. While the person of faith does not ask for proof, he does want to feel that his faith is reasonable and not mere fantasy. Archaeology, by supplying him with material remains from biblical times and places, and by interpreting these data, provides a context of reality for the biblical story and reasonability for biblical faith" (1979, Vol. 1, p. 244).

Archaeological discoveries in Egypt and Iraq have been valuable in confirming the biblical account. However, much evidence still remains beneath the surface. Much of the territory of the biblical kingdoms of Israel and Judah remains to be archaeologically explored.

Not until the end of World War I, when some of this area came under British control, did prolonged scientific surveys and excavations begin.

After the Balfour Declaration in 1917, Jews began to arrive in Palestine; the British, Americans and others were joined in digs by Jews in their ancestral homelands. Today there are some 300 sizable excavations underway in Israel, an extraordinary number for a country only 200 miles long and 60 miles wide.

Archaeology makes a believer

The abundance of archaeological evidence in support of the Bible can strengthen faith, and in some cases it has greatly contributed to giving birth to belief where none existed before.

An example of physical evidence building one's faith is the life of Englishman William M. Ramsay (1851-1939). Born in the lap of luxury, Ramsay was dutifully raised as a nonbeliever by his atheist parents. He graduated from Oxford University with a doctorate in philosophy and became a professor at the University of Aberdeen.

Determined to undermine the historical accuracy of the Bible, he studied archaeology with the aim of disproving the biblical account. Once ready with the necessary scientific tools and learning, he traveled to Palestine and focused on the book of Acts, which he fully expected to

refute as nothing more than myth.

After a quarter-century of work, Ramsay was awestruck by the accuracy of the book of Acts. In his quest to refute the Bible, Ramsay discovered many facts which confirmed its accuracy.

He had to concede that Luke's account of the events and setting recorded in the narrative were exact even in the smallest detail. Far from attacking the biblical account, Ramsay produced a book, St. Paul, the Traveller and Roman Citizen, which supported it.

Eventually, William Ramsay shook the intellectual world by writing that he had converted to Christianity. Ironically, this man who set out to refute the Bible, found himself accepting the Bible as God's Word because of his explorations and discoveries. For his contribution to biblical knowledge with his many books, he was knighted also.

The study of archaeology can help fortify faith. It allows us to take a fascinating journey back in time to study the stones and artifacts that bear mute but compelling witness to the truth of Scripture.

What else has been found? Future chapters will describe discoveries that parallel and illuminate the biblical account.

Two Jigsaw Puzzles, Two Purposes

What can we say about the relationship between the Bible and archaeology? An illustration can help. Let us imagine two jigsaw puzzles. The first is the Bible, put together under the inspiration of God Himself. The pieces fit together perfectly. As God's Word says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17, emphasis added).

This first puzzle's primary purpose is to reveal not science and history per se but the record of God's dealings with humankind. Much of this revelation is knowledge that cannot be examined under a microscope or perceived through our senses. It is knowledge revealed by God.

Throughout the Bible, a common theme is God's participation in human history. Whether it be the creation account, His dealings with Israel or the early New Testament Church, God is central.

Much of this information is not the kind that archaeology can discover through the study of ancient remains. Yet God's inspired account of His interaction with living, breathing people is inserted into writings about the physical surroundings of those people. Such information is genuine and true, since God "cannot lie" (Titus 1:2).

Limits of archeology

The physical evidence can be likened to a second jigsaw puzzle, one based on scientific evidence and that is valuable to our faith by its ability to confirm the veracity of the biblical accounts.

The second jigsaw puzzle concerns how archaeology and related disciplines can reveal physical evidence concerning biblical history. The picture presented is partial; not all archaeological evidence has survived. Conclusions derived from archaeological discoveries are necessarily uncertain. Like a puzzle, pieces can be initially misplaced. As new discoveries are made or better interpretations are offered, the position of some pieces can shift. Many pieces are faded and worn, making placement difficult.

Dating of biblical sites is based primarily on surviving pottery, with its distinctive styles associated with specific historical periods. What remains is an incomplete picture of the past. As archaeologist Paul W. Lapp commented, "Palestinian archaeology may be past infancy but has hardly gotten beyond childhood." Archaeology is a developing and imperfect science.

Some archaeologists estimate that only one thousandth of the original artifacts have survived. Some 5,000 sites are known to scientists in Palestine, and only about 350 have been excavated. Of these, fewer than 2 percent have been extensively excavated. All conclusions, then, are based on small amounts of evidence.

Significant portions of the Bible now corroborated

How should the relative scarcity of evidence affect our Christian beliefs? Our faith should not be based on possession of all the material and historical evidence. Definitive analysis is not a prerequisite for determining whether or not the Bible is historically accurate and true.

In spite of the relatively small amount of material that has been excavated and analyzed, considerable evidence confirming the biblical account is available. More is being uncovered all the time. Significant portions of the Old Testament historical record have now been corroborated by archaeology.

Bryant Wood notes the consensus of archaeologists on the following point: "The purpose of Biblical archaeology is to enhance our comprehension of the Bible, and so its greatest achievement, in my view, has been the extraordinary illumination of the . . . time of the Israelite monarchy" (Biblical Archaeology Review, May-June, 1995, p. 33).

From c. 1000 B.C. through the New Testament period, the archaeological evidence is strong. Before that time, it is sparse. This is quite natural, considering the circumstances. As Wood explains: "Exploring that pre-history [before 1000 B.C.] is challenging: It requires tracing the archaeological record of a pastoral community, rather than an agrarian-based political entity that built cities and made contacts with surrounding nations" (ibid., p. 35).

We will never possess all the physical evidence. Most has been destroyed by time and wear. We cannot reproduce miracles, nor can God's presence be examined and confirmed in a laboratory. Faith will always be based primarily on spiritual discernment and trust in God's Word.

Archaeology and Genesis: What Does the Record Show? - Part 1

A century ago Charles Darwin advanced an alternative to the biblical account of creation. About the same time, Karl Marx made use of the theory of materialism, which stated that matter has always existed and doesn't need a Creator. This provided his followers with an alternative to belief in God. Then literary criticism focused its sights on the Bible and slowly began to attempt to tear it to pieces. Literary critics claimed that the Bible is filled with myths and is of much more recent origin than the Bible itself claims to be.

As one scholar explains, man began to think of himself, rather than God, as the center of the universe. "The idea of evolution had captured the thinking of that day, and was thought to furnish the best key to the understanding of history as well as of nature. Religion was discussed from the standpoint of its subjective benefits to man. All possibility of special revelation from a personal God was discounted, and the religious side of man was to be explained by a natural process . . . They concluded that Israel's religion must have developed along similar lines" (A. Noordtzy, Bibliotheca Sacra, Vol. 98-99, pp. 388-390, 1940-41).

When the 20th century dawned, the tide of criticism eroded belief in the literal truth of the biblical accounts. Then came a series of remarkable archaeological discoveries. Archaeology began in the 19th century but came to full force in the 20th. Critics of the historical accuracy of the Bible were confronted with physical evidence attesting to the truthfulness of certain accounts.

As author John Elder comments, the study of archaeology had much to do with tipping the scales, in many people's minds, back in the favor of biblical credibility. "Little by little, one city after another, one civilization after another, one culture after another, whose memories were enshrined only in the Bible, were restored to their proper places in ancient history by the studies of the archaeologists . . . Nowhere has archaeological discovery refuted the Bible as history" (Prophets, Idols and Diggers, 1960, p. 16).

In this chapter we take a look at some of the astounding discoveries of the last two centuries and show how physical evidence confirms aspects of the biblical record.

When Luke wrote the Gospel that bears his name, he carefully laid out the evidence in favor of the historicity of Jesus Christ and His miracles, including His resurrection. He wanted his account to meet the scrutiny of doubters. Luke said he intended to write "an orderly account" (Luke 1:1-4) so his readers could "know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed" (emphasis added throughout).

Luke then proceeded to augment his account with historical references mentioning, for example, the contemporaneous rulers of Judah and the emperor of the Roman Empire (Luke 1:5; 2:1).

Because of the number of discoveries, we cannot examine all of the evidence here. We will discuss, however, some of the principal finds that corroborate parts of the biblical record of

Genesis.

The Temptation Seal

Seals made use of some of the most ancient forms of writing. They were used to certify documents, to show authority and, on occasion, as amulets. The earliest seals were made of clay impressed with markings or writing, and some of them became hardened with time or were baked when fires swept through a city. Since they are made of clay, they have survived much longer than records written on papyrus or parchment.

Archaeologists' dating of some seals has found them to be more than 5,000 years old. They are among the few surviving materials that provide firm evidence of people's beliefs at the dawn of civilization. Seals have been uncovered that confirm several biblical accounts, including some in Genesis.

The first chapters of the book of Genesis cover the creation of humans and the temptation that induced Adam to sin. God had given Adam certain laws to keep and explained the consequences of disobedience. "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Genesis 2:16-17).

Genesis depicts the tempter, Satan, influencing Eve and in turn her husband, Adam, to disobey their Creator. God had told Adam and Eve they would die if they ate of the tree. But the serpent said to Eve, "You will not surely die." So Eve partook, found the fruit pleasant, then offered it to her husband, "and he ate" (Genesis 3:1-6).

Is this account only a myth? Many critics thought so. Yet archaeology has unearthed, not in biblical Israel, but in the site of the most ancient civilization known, Sumer, a seal depicting this very sequence of events described in the book of Genesis. This find, known as the Temptation Seal, is in the British Museum. It dates to the third millennium before Christ, some 5,000 years ago. This artifact shows a man and a woman viewing a tree, and behind the woman is a serpent. The man and woman are both reaching for fruit of the tree.

The Genesis account of the temptation was believed to be a fabrication by Jewish writers, yet this graphic portrayal of events described in Genesis existed thousands of years before critics believe the book of Genesis was written. This artifact, one of the earliest surviving records, demonstrates that humans knew the essentials of the temptation incident, and not only from the biblical account written in Genesis.

The Adam and Eve seal

Another Sumerian seal, dated ca. 3500 B.C. and now housed in the museum of the University of Pennsylvania, shows events that took place after the man and woman ate the forbidden fruit. This seal depicts the naked figures of a male and a female, bowed in humiliation, being driven out, followed by a serpent. This seal also describes the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden: ". . . Therefore the LORD God sent him [Adam] out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken" (Genesis 3:23).

It is difficult to explain what the three figures, engraved on a seal dating from the beginnings of human antiquity, are doing if the artifact is not another depiction of the Genesis account.

The flood epics

"And the waters prevailed exceedingly on the earth, and all the high hills under the whole heaven were covered . . . And all flesh died that moved on the earth" (Genesis 7:19, 21).

One of the most questioned accounts of the Bible is the flood of Noah's time. A century ago liberal critics considered it one of the most fanciful biblical myths. Yet more than a century of archaeological digging has revealed accounts of the flood in the earliest of civilizations.

One of the most astounding finds is the Gilgamesh Epic, recorded on clay tablets that were translated in 1872 by George Smith of the British Museum. The tablets narrate the flood account from the perspective of the ancient Babylonians. A similar account was found on Sumerian tablets, which are the earliest writings yet discovered.

Which one is the more authentic account of the flood? That is easily answered. Professor Gleason Archer notes that the differences in the Gilgamesh and Genesis narratives are too great to allow one to have been borrowed from the other. "The stark contrast between the passion-driven, quarrelsome, greedy gods of the Babylonian pantheon and the majestic holiness of Jehovah is most striking and significant," he writes. "Likewise the utter implausibility of a cube-shaped ark and an inundation of the entire world by a mere fourteen-day downpour [of the Gilgamesh Epic] stand in opposition to the seaworthy dimensions and the gradual sinking of the waters in the Biblical record" (A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, 1974, p. 211).

Clearly, the Gilgamesh Epic shows evidence of corruption.

These ancient tablets are by no means the only external corroboration of the biblical flood narrative. An enterprising historian, Aaron Smith, is said to have patiently tallied all the flood stories he could find. He came across 80,000 works in 72 languages about the deluge (Werner Keller, The Bible as History, 1980, p. 38).

Certainly if Noah's flood were just a local event affecting people in a limited geographic region, its impact would not have been etched indelibly into the minds of so many far-flung peoples.

One historian notes: "The Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians of Mesopotamia might well be expected to cherish a similar tradition to that of the Hebrews, since they lived so close to the presumed seat of antediluvian civilization . . . But what shall we say of the legend of Manu preserved among the Hindus . . . or of Fah-he among the Chinese . . . or of Nu-u among the Hawaiians; or of Tezpi among the Mexican Indians; or of Manabozho among the Algonquins? . . . All of these agree that all mankind was destroyed by a great flood (usually represented as worldwide) as a result of divine displeasure at human sin, and that a single man with his family or a very few friends survived the catastrophe by means of a ship or raft or large canoe of some sort" (Archer, p. 209).

The Tower of Babel

"Then they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens . . .'" (Genesis 11:3-4).

Many of us have heard about the Tower of Babel, but few know of the solid evidence behind the Bible account.

Excavations in Iraq at the beginning of this century revealed that an enormous tower had existed in Babylon at one time. Werner Keller writes: "In 1899 the German Oriental Society equipped a large expedition under the direction of Professor Robert Koldewey, the architect, to examine the famous ruined mound of 'Babil' on the Euphrates. The excavations, as it turned out, took longer than anywhere else. In eighteen years the most famous metropolis of the ancient world, the royal seat of Nebuchadnezzar, was brought to light, and at the same time, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the 'Hanging Gardens' . . . and 'E-temen-an-ki,' the legendary Tower of Babel . . .

"The bricklaying technique described in the Bible at the building of the Tower of Babel corresponds with the findings of the archaeologists. As the investigations confirmed, actually only asphalted bricks were used in the construction, especially in the foundation. That was clearly necessary for the security of the structure in accordance with building regulations . . . Foundations and stonework were therefore made waterproof and damp-proof with 'slime,' i.e., asphalt . . . Seven stages, 'seven squares,' rose one above the other. A little tablet belonging to an architect which was found in the temple expressly mentions that length, breadth and height were equal . . . The length of the sides at the base is given as being rather more than 290 feet. The archaeologists measured it as 295 feet. According to that the tower must have been almost 300 feet high" (The Bible As History, 1980 edition, pp. 302, 317-318).

This means the tower rose to the height of a 20-story building.

Further research has revealed that the original tower was destroyed, and on the same site a similar tower was later built at the time of Nebuchadnezzar.

D.J. Wiseman, professor of Assyriology, explains: "The tower was severely damaged in the war of 652-648 B.C. but restored again by Nebuchadrezzar II (605-562 B.C.). It was this building, part of which was recovered by Koldewey in 1899, which was described by Herodotus on his visit c. 460 B.C. . . . The base stage [of the later tower] measured 90 by 90 m[eters] and was 33 m[eters] high . . . The ziggurat [a sacred tower] at Babylon was demolished by Xerxes in 472 B.C., and though Alexander cleared the rubble prior to its restoration this was thwarted by his death. The bricks were subsequently removed by the local inhabitants, and today the site of Etemenanki is a pit as deep as the original construction was high" (New Bible Dictionary, 1982, p. 111).

Sacred towers were common in Mesopotamia. So far, the ruins of 35 such structures have been found. The first was the one at Babel.

From this brief survey, we can see the light that archaeology has shed on questions about the veracity of the biblical record. Although doubters will always question the truthfulness of God's Word, fewer and fewer now doubt its historical statements.

Many other exciting archaeological finds have helped confirm and shed light on the book of

Genesis, and these will be examined in a future chapter.

Archaeology and Genesis: What Does the Record Show? - Part 2

In the last chapter, we examined several archaeological finds that illuminate portions of the book of Genesis. In this chapter we continue our exploration of discoveries that verify the accuracy of other aspects of the Genesis account, beginning with the biblical patriarch Abraham.

Abraham and the city of Ur

"And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, . . . and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan" (Genesis 11:31).

A century ago, German liberal critic Theodor Nöldeke questioned the historical existence of Abraham and of "Ur of the Chaldeans." He, along with others, regarded the Genesis account of Abraham and his descendants as fictional. Yet this century has brought to light an enormous amount of evidence to back the biblical record of Abraham.

In 1922 Leonard Woolley thoroughly excavated the city of Ur in southern Iraq and found it had been a thriving metropolis around 2000 B.C., precisely the time of Abraham. Based on his findings, Woolley even drew a map of the city that showed its orderly boulevards and made up blueprints of spacious dwellings with indoor baths. Classrooms were excavated that yielded schoolchildren's tablets with lessons on grammar and arithmetic still visible. In addition, variations on the name Abraham were found that dated to a century or two after his death.

The International Standard Encyclopedia, rejecting Nöldeke's theory that Abraham was a mythical figure, concludes: "From the archaeological evidence it is apparent that Abraham was the product of an advanced culture, and was typical of the upper-class patriarch of his day: His actions are set against a well-authenticated background of non-biblical material, making him a true son of his age who bore the same name and traversed the same general territory, as well as living in the same towns, as his contemporaries. He is in every sense a genuine Middle Bronze Age person, and not a retrojection of later Israelite historical thought, as used to be imagined . . ." (Vol. 1, 1979, p. 17).

"Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land" (Genesis 12:10). "So they took their livestock and their goods, which they had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to Egypt, Jacob and all his descendants with him" (Genesis 46:6).

What did the biblical patriarchs and their families look like? The Bible speaks of the wealth of Abraham in cattle and sheep (Genesis 12:16). Later it talks about the brothers' envy over the multicolored coat that Jacob gave to Joseph (Genesis 37:3). It tells about the sheep and goats that Jacob cleverly bred to avoid their being confiscated by his father-in-law (Genesis 30:33-43). Mentioned are musical instruments such as the harp (Genesis 31:27) and weapons such as the bow and arrow used for protection (Genesis 27:3). Were all these only fabrications and the

product of fables?

At the turn of our century, several royal tombs were excavated 150 miles south of Cairo. There on one of the walls is a beautiful painting, later dated ca. 1900 B.C., of Semites entering Egypt to sell their wares. Men, women and children are pictured, some with multicolored clothing. They have harps, bows and arrows and spears. Accompanying them are goats and donkeys for food and conveyance. This painting shows people of the same lineage as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wearing the clothing, caring for the same type of animals and using implements as described in the Bible record. It is an impressive find that backs the biblical description of that time, even in minute detail.

Laban's teraphim

Some have puzzled over the biblical story of Rachel's desperate attempt to hide her father's household gods, even risking her life to carry them with her. We read in Genesis 31:

"Then Jacob rose and set his sons and his wives on camels . . . Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel had stolen the household idols that were her father's . . . And Laban was told on the third day that Jacob had fled. Then he took his brethren with him and pursued him for seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the mountains of Gilead . . .

"And Laban said to Jacob: 'What have you done, that you have stolen away unknown to me, and carried away my daughters . . .? And now you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?'

"Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, 'Because I was afraid, for I said, "Perhaps you would take your daughters from me by force." With whomever you find your gods, do not let him live. In the presence of our brethren, identify what
I have of yours and take it with you.'

"For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them . . . Now Rachel had taken the household idols, put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. And Laban searched all about the tent but did not find them. And she said to her father, 'Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is with me'" (verses 17-35).

Why were these "household gods" so important? Archaeological evidence reveals the answer. Many of these domestic idols, called teraphim, have been found in the Middle East. In the 1920s more than 20,000 tablets, now called the Nuzi tablets, were discovered in northern Iraq. They include much information on law, commercial transactions and religion that has shed light on the customs of Abraham's time.

The teraphim are mentioned as household gods that were used to determine the inheritance and titles of the sons of a family. Although scholars dispute how much the patriarchs were influenced by such practices, the biblical account fits this picture well. Clearly, Rachel was worried about leaving these idols behind. Laban certainly thought they were of great importance and traveled with his other sons for several days to recover them. These actions on their part make sense if the teraphim were used to help his other sons confirm their rights of inheritance.

These idols were also used to bring good luck and even for calling upon other gods. After

another encounter with the true God, when Jacob found that Rachel had stolen the idols, he had her get rid of them. "And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you . . .'" (Genesis 35:2).

Again, the biblical account fits with archaeological evidence of the customs of the people of that time.

Joseph in Egypt

"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt" (Genesis 39:1).

Perhaps one can acknowledge that these findings fit Abraham and his descendants in Mesopotamia and Canaan, but do they confirm the abundant archaeological evidence of Egyptian life and culture?

The Bible tells of a young Joseph who was sold into slavery and taken to Egypt as a young man. If this account is nothing more than myth, surely the biblical story could easily be refuted, since much more is known of Egyptian history and culture than of any other civilization of the Middle East of that time. The Egyptians left monument after monument, their tombs with walls full of pictures and writings of their daily lives. They inscribed in stone much of their history. If the biblical story is false, it should not be difficult to expose it as a fraud, since details in the account would surely be discovered to be out of place.

Yet the biblical account fits. In Egypt Joseph ended up as a slave in an important official's home. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. When he fled from her, he was falsely accused by her and thrown into prison. These elements all reflect Egyptian customs as described in the monuments-the abundance of Semitic slaves and stories of frivolous Egyptian wives. Says one encyclopedia: "Egyptian sources indicate that both in literature and in daily life some other Egyptian women were no better than Potiphar's wife" (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 2, p. 1128).

When God intervened and Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream (literature of that time indicates that interpreting dreams was a common practice), he was placed as second in command under Pharaoh.

The Egyptian ruler complimented him: "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you.' And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph's hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. And he had him ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried out before him, 'Bow the knee!' So he set him over all the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:39-43).

In one of the walls in a royal Egyptian tomb is a beautiful engraving of the investiture ceremony for a new prime minister. The official is clothed in a white linen gown and wears a gold chain around his neck. As Werner Keller maintains: "Joseph's elevation to be viceroy of Egypt is reproduced in the Bible exactly according to protocol. He is invested with the insignia of his high office, he receives the ring, Pharaoh's seal, a costly linen vestment, and a golden chain. This is

exactly how Egyptian artists depict this solemn ceremony on murals and reliefs. As viceroy, Joseph rides in Pharaoh's 'second chariot.' That could indicate the 'period of the Hyksos' at the earliest, for it is only during the period of the 'rulers of the foreign lands' . . . that the fast war chariot reached Egypt . . . Before their day this had not been the practice on the Nile. The ceremonial chariot harnessed to thoroughbred horses was in those days the Rolls-Royce of the governors. The first chariot belonged to the ruler, the 'second chariot' was occupied by his chief minister" (The Bible as History, 1980, p. 89).

From this brief survey we can see some of the light that archaeology has shed on the biblical record. Although doubters will always scoff at the truth of God's Word-since God's way of life and His laws are not easy to keep-fewer and fewer now doubt the Bible's historical basis.

Such discoveries continue to verify the inspiration of God's Word. As Paul said: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Future chapters will present more archaeological evidence that confirms the Bible account.

Archaeology and the Book of Exodus: Exit From Egypt - Part 1

In earlier chapters, we examined several archaeological finds that illuminate portions of the book of Genesis. In this chapter we continue our exploration of discoveries that illuminate the biblical accounts, focusing on Exodus, the second book of the Bible.

Exodus in English derives from the Latin and means simply "to exit." The book of Exodus describes the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, an event distinguished by a mighty struggle between two unequal opponents. On the one hand was an oppressed nation of slaves and on the other the most powerful nation in the Middle East, if not the world. Viewed strictly physically, the odds in this struggle between Israel and Egypt were stacked against the Israelites.

What has archaeology found that pertains to the Exodus and the Israelites' time in Egypt? Scientists have made several significant discoveries that make this part of the Bible come alive.

Egyptian brick-making

In the book of Exodus we see the Egyptians forcing the Israelites to build great cities for Pharaoh: "Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh supply cities, Pithom and Raamses" (Exodus 1:11).

Most of us know a little about the Egyptian pyramids, which were built of stone. But not all Egyptian pyramids were made of stone; brick was the principal building material used in the country. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia notes that "throughout Egyptian history sun-dried brick was the chief building material. Stone was reserved for temples and other monumental constructions" (Vol. 1, p. 546).

Therefore the Egyptians needed millions of bricks, and the Israelites labored long and hard to supply the demand. The Egyptians "made their lives bitter with hard bondage-in mortar, in brick, and in all manner of service in the field" (Exodus 1:14, emphasis added throughout).

When Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh that God wanted His people, the Israelites, to stop working and observe a religious festival in the wilderness, Pharaoh was incensed. Instead of yielding, he increased the work load: "So the same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their officers, saying, 'You shall no longer give the people straw to make brick as before. Let them go and gather straw for themselves'" (Exodus 5:6-7).

This cruel measure added to the Israelites' already arduous tasks. The Israelite slaves had to head for the fields to gather straw to mix with the mud.

The biblical detail about using straw in brick-making is puzzling to some. How, they ask, could the addition of straw as an ingredient make bricks stronger?

In Egypt the mud-straw combination was commonly used to strengthen building blocks. It also

prevented the bricks from cracking or losing shape. Modern investigators have run tests that show that when straw is mixed with mud the resulting bricks are three times as strong as those made without straw. Fluids in the straw release humic acid and harden the bricks (Gerald Vardaman, Archaeology and the Living Word, 1966, p. 37). To this day, after thousands of years, mud-brick monuments still stand in Egypt.

The 10 plagues

Egyptology has illuminated our understanding of the Bible's description of the plagues that struck Egypt and led to the Israelites' departure from that land.

The Egyptians were religious people. They had gods for everything and scrupulously tried to please them. They had 39 principal gods, many of them depicted in Egyptian art with animal bodies or heads. In Egyptian temples, priests cared for many types of sacred animals that represented deities.

In one respect the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt was a confrontation between the true God, Yahweh, and the false gods of that land. It would remove any doubt in the Israelites' minds as to who was the true God and which was the true religion. God had in mind not only to take His people from Egypt, but to discourage worship of the supposedly powerful Egyptian gods. He made this clear when He told Moses: "For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord" (Exodus 12:12).

Later, in Numbers 33:4, we read that "on their gods the Lord had executed judgments." God directed each of the 10 plagues against Egyptian gods that ostensibly held sway over an aspect of nature. The plagues represented, collectively, a dramatic demonstration to Israelite and Egyptian alike that the gods were false; they were powerless to come to the aid of anyone who implored them.

An ancient Egyptian calendar reveals numerous holidays dedicated to the gods-so many that it appears that not many working days remained in the year. When Moses told Pharaoh that Israel would leave for several days to celebrate a feast to God, Pharaoh was indignant: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go . . . Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people from their work? Get back to your labor" (Exodus 5:2, 4).

Pharaoh apparently thought that the Israelites enjoyed plenty of free time, so he refused the petition. Observing Pharaoh's recalcitrance, God acted.

Plagues against the deities

The first plague was aimed at the most venerable and valuable resource of Egyptian civilization, the powerful Nile River, along with the gods the Egyptians associated with it. Egypt's food supply depended on the flooding of the Nile, as well as its annual deposits of silt to replenish the fertility of the soil. Sometimes, as in Joseph's day, failure of the Nile to overflow its banks would result in a famine. So the Egyptians prayed regularly to their gods for abundant water. The first

plague made the water undrinkable and rancid. The fish, a valuable source of food, perished.

The Egyptians counted on the Nile goddess Hapi and the powerful Osiris to protect the Nile. Nothing resulted from the clamor and prayers of the Egyptians that their gods would purify the Nile. Only when Moses and Aaron prayed to the true God were the waters refreshed. Yet Pharaoh remained proud. He believed a host of powerful gods were waiting to do his bidding; indeed Pharaoh himself was considered a god by most Egyptians.

The second plague targeted one of the creatures the Egyptians associated with the Nile. Egyptians worshiped the frog in the form of Heqt, whose statue bore the head of a frog. This god was symbolic of good crops and blessings in the afterlife. Egyptians noticed that, when the Nile reached a certain level and overflowed, frogs abounded. Their presence was an omen of bountiful crops and control of the insect population. A low Nile with few frogs meant a lack of silt, poor crops and many insects.

Heqt, god of the frogs, supposedly controlled the frog population. When the second plague produced too many frogs, it appeared to the Egyptians that the god who governed them had lost control. No amount of prayers and incense altered the situation. Only when the true God intervened did the frogs die and the crisis end.

The third and fourth plagues featured another favorite god of the Egyptians, Kheper, the scarab deity represented by beetles and other insects. The image of the scarab god appeared frequently on amulets. "The cult to flies, and especially of the beetles, was an important part of the ancient Egyptian religion" (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, Exegetical Commentary of the Bible, Vol. 1, p. 67). "Various types of beetles were venerated in Egypt; among them the dung beetle [which] became the emblem of resurrection and continual existence . . ." (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 4, p. 258).

When a swarm of lice or gnats (or possibly mosquitoes) and horseflies stung the populace, the court magicians asked the insect god to control them, but to no avail. Only when Pharaoh pleaded with Moses to ask the God of Israel to remove the pests did the plague abate.

Sacred bull

The next plague affected cattle, which the Egyptians considered to be under the control of Apis, the bull god, and Hathor, the cowlike mother goddess. The bull was considered sacred. When the bull in a temple died, it was mummified and buried with great pomp. The fifth plague struck at this mode of worship. "So the Lord did this thing on the next day, and all the livestock of Egypt died; but of the livestock of the children of Israel, not one of them died" (Exodus 9:6). No amount of pagan prayer could alter the outcome.

Next came a plague of boils, which the Egyptians thought they could cure by resorting to their god of medicine, Imhotep, a legendary Egyptian physician who came to be worshiped. They also revered Thoth, the god of magic and healing. But again in this case the boils did not go away. Even worse, the court magicians who besought these entities were themselves covered with the pestilence: "And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians" (verse 11).

Again, Pharaoh and other Egyptians pleaded with Moses that God would take away the

problem. God's power to remove this plague served as a witness not only to the Egyptians and the Israelites, but to the rest of the world. God told Pharaoh: "But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth" (verse 16). This witness remains with us today through the Bible account.

The seventh and eighth plagues struck Egypt's crops. First, a horrible hailstorm hit the harvest, then a swarm of locusts completed the destruction. The crops were supposed to be guarded by Seth, the harvest god, and it was up to Nut, the sky goddess, to prevent weather disasters. Yet the pleas of the Egyptians fell on deaf ears. Pharaoh was running out of gods to protect his people.

God strikes the mightiest

The final two plagues were directed at the two mightiest gods of the Egyptians, Ra the chief god, represented by the sun, and Pharaoh himself.

Egyptians believed Ra to be the source of life, bringing light and heat to the earth. The ninth plague brought three days of no sunlight. The darkness was so "thick," says Scripture, that even lamps could not dispel the blackness. "So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another; nor did anyone rise from his place for three days. But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings" (Exodus 10:22-23).

In spite of the prayers and supplications the Egyptians must have offered up to Ra, the sun god did nothing.

The final god in dire need of humbling was Pharaoh himself, who supposedly descended from the god Ra. Pharaoh's patron gods were Osiris, the judge of the dead, and Horus, the god of light. Egyptian worship of the Pharaohs found expression in the construction for their leaders of great pyramids as tombs. The 10th plague struck even the offspring of the Egyptians' man-god.

Pharaoh himself was powerless to stop the death of his firstborn son, who was next in line to sit worthy of Egyptians' worship. "And it came to pass at midnight that the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock" (Exodus 12:29). With his gods impotent and humiliated, mighty Pharaoh finally relented, and the Exodus of the children of Israel began.

In the next chapter, we will present more archaeological evidence that illuminates the historical account of the book of Exodus.

Archaeology and the Book of Exodus: Exit From Egypt - Part 2

In earlier chapters, we examined archaeological finds that illuminate portions of the book of Genesis and Exodus. In this chapter we continue our exploration of discoveries that confirm other aspects of the Exodus account, beginning with the incident of the Israelites' worship of the golden calf.

The golden calf

After crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites made their way to Mount Sinai. The account of Israel's appropriation of a golden calf to worship was long questioned by secular scholars. They noted that bull-worship was common in both Egypt and Canaan, but not calf-worship. However, in 1991 a statue of a silver calf was found in an excavation of ancient Ashkelon on Israel's coast. Authorities dated this calf to more than 100 years before the Exodus.

When Aaron shouted to the people, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:4), he knew well how popular calf-worship was. Four centuries later, almost the same words were uttered by King Jeroboam when he made two golden calves and told the people, "Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (1 Kings 12:28). In Biblical Archaeology Review, an extensive article on the discovery of the silver calf notes: "The Golden Calf worshipped at the foot of Mt. Sinai by impatient Israelites (Exodus 32) may have resembled this statuette" (March-April 1991, p. 1).

The eating of quails

During their wilderness years the Israelites complained to God that they had only manna to eat: "Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: 'Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!' " (Numbers 11:4-6).

This list represents one of the 10 major murmurings of the Israelites against God and Moses (Numbers 14:22). God decided to give the people what they asked for: "Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the Lord who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, 'Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?' " (Numbers 11:18-20).

The next day quail descended on the Israelite camp to a depth of 12 inches. These fowl were common in biblical times and remain so in the Middle East. They are migratory birds that fly at the end of the European summer to the Sinai peninsula, where they remain for six months.

"The old world quail . . . a small, mottled brown game bird about 18 cm. (7 in.) long, is the only member of the [pheasant] subfamily . . . that is migratory. The routes of migration run from southern Europe, along the eastern Mediterranean coast, through the Sinai Peninsula, to Arabia or West Africa. The quails travel southward in the late summer and northward in early spring (the time of the Israelite exodus from Egypt) . . . As recently as the early decades of the 20th cent[ury], migrating quails were killed by Egyptians at the rate of two million annually; in 1920 a kill of three million was recorded" (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, Vol. 4, pp. 4-5).

The miracle of God was to bring these quails to the Israelite camp and deposit them in huge numbers in that precise location.

False prophet

When the Israelites began their final journey to the Promised Land, they passed through the land of the Ammonites close to Moabite territory. They needed passage through this area to enter Canaan by way of Jericho. But King Balak of the Moabites refused to let the Israelites enter peacefully. He resorted to a known pagan prophet of the times, Balaam, to prevent them from entering his land.

"Then he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River [Euphrates] in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying: 'Look, a people has come from Egypt. See, they cover the face of the earth, and are settling next to me! Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me'" (Numbers 22:5).

Apparently, Balaam's renown was such that a Moabite king would pay a considerable sum for his services. In 1967 archaeologists digging up the remains of Deir Alla, an ancient Ammonite city on the east bank of the Jordan, found an inscription that mentioned Balaam, the son of Beor. The 16 lines of an incomplete inscription on a wall turned out to be part of one of Balaam's prophecies, in language similar to that is recorded in Numbers.

The Bible describes God's censure of Balaam. One night God forbade him to curse the Israelites. Disappointed, he told Moabite messengers he could not help them. "So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, 'Go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to give me permission to go with you' " (verse 13).

Later God forced Balaam to prophesy of Israel's blessings and victories. "Then he took up his oracle and said: 'The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor . . . who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes wide open: How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! . . . God brings him out of Egypt; he has strength like a wild ox; he shall consume the nations, his enemies; he shall break their bones and pierce them with arrows' " (Numbers 24:3-8).

Shortly after these events Balaam, greedy for money (2 Peter 2:15), helped the Moabites induce Israel to sin. Not surprisingly, he perished after the defeat of the Moabites and Midianites (Numbers 31:8).

The restored text discovered in Deir Alla reads: "Inscription of Balaam, son of Beor, the man who was a seer of the gods. Lo, the gods came to him at night and spoke to him. According to

these words, and they said to Balaam, son of Beor thus: 'There has appeared the last flame, a fire of chastisement has appeared!' And Balaam arose the next day and he could not eat and he wept intensely. And his people came to him and said to Balaam, son of Beor: 'Why do you fast and why do you weep?' And he said to them: 'Sit down! I shall show you how great is the calamity! And come, see the deeds of the gods! . . .' "

These words are strikingly similar in detail to the biblical account. Apparently the memory of what happened to this seer remained in the memory of the Ammonites and was recorded in their version.

Archaeologist Andre Lemaire, who pieced together the incomplete script, wrote: ". . . The inscription from Deir Alla, dated to about the middle of the eighth century B.C. and written on the wall of what may have been some kind of religious teaching center, is very likely the earliest extant example of a prophetic text. The principal personage in the Deir Alla text is the seer Balaam, son of Beor, well known to us from the stories in Numbers" (Biblical Archaeology Review, September-October 1985, p. 39).

Here we have another biblical figure who cannot be related to myth.

The route from Egypt

Another source of scholarly controversy concerns the route the Israelites took to enter the Promised Land. "The Bible is very specific in its list of places along the final stage of the Exodus route taken by the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. Yet it is this very specificity that has made it vulnerable to criticism from some scholars. Many of the places in question, they say, did not exist when the Exodus is said to have occurred" (Biblical Archaeology Review, September-October 1994, p. 5).

Yet three lists showing the very route the Israelites took to enter Canaan have been found in Egyptian monuments.

Numbers 33:45-49 describes the Israelites passing through Ijim, Dibon Gad, Almon Diblathaim, Nebo, Abel and finally the Jordan. The route the Egyptians took to supervise this area, which they ruled for many centuries, includes eight places, of which six appear in the same sequence mentioned primarily in Numbers 33: Melah, Ijim, Heres-Hareseth (mentioned only in Judges 8:13), Dibon, Abel and the Jordan.

Charles Krahmalkov, a professor of ancient Near Eastern languages, speaks of the accuracy of the biblical account: "In short, the Biblical story of the invasion of Transjordan that set the stage for the conquest of all Palestine is told against a background that is historically accurate. The Israelite invasion route described in Numbers 33:45b-50 was in fact an official, heavily trafficked Egyptian road . . ." (Biblical Archaeology Review, September-October 1994, p. 58).

Thus, archaeology, notwithstanding scholarly criticism, confirms another part of biblical history.

The Red Sea or the Reed Sea?

For many years scholars have disagreed over the identity of the sea the Israelites crossed and thus the site of the drowning of Pharaoh's army. Three routes for the Exodus have been proposed and continue to be debated.

Some believe that the Israelites' path took them north to the coast and that the "sea" they crossed was part of Lake Sirbonis, an arm or bay of the Mediterranean, after the crossing of which they turned south into the Sinai Peninsula.

Others have adopted the idea that the Israelites took a central route and crossed a shallow lake north of the Red Sea called the Reed Sea. The term in Hebrew is yam suph. Yam means "sea," and suph is generally thought to mean "reeds," "rushes" or possibly "seaweed." That is why some versions of the Bible call it "the Sea of Reeds" or "Reed Sea" instead of the Red Sea. (See Exodus 15:4 in the Revised Standard Version, New American Bible and Jerusalem Bible.)

Some scholars prefer the translation "Reed Sea," noting that lakes north of the Red Sea are abundant with reeds. They usually designate one of these shallow bodies of water as the site of the Israelite crossing but say that the Egyptians, with their heavy chariots, got bogged down and somehow drowned.

Other scholars prefer a southern route, pointing to evidence that they feel demonstrates that yam suph may mean "sea at the end of the world," as some conceive it to have been. Says theology professor Bernard F. Batto: "What we call the Red Sea . . . was regarded by the ancients as the sea at the end of the world. Interestingly enough, the Greeks applied the name Red Sea not only to our Red Sea but also to the Indian Ocean and, later when they discovered it, even to the Persian Gulf . . . Yam sup came to refer to the Red Sea because like other ancient peoples, the Israelites did not distinguish the Red Sea from oceans further to the south. To their way of thinking, the Red Sea—the yam sup—was the sea at the end of the earth" (Biblical Archaeology Review, July-August 1984, p. 59).

In other biblical references, yam suph means Red Sea or its arms, the Gulf of Suez and Gulf of Aqaba. In 1 Kings 9:26 we read: "King Solomon also built a fleet of ships at Ezion Geber, which is near Elath on the shore of the Red Sea [yam suph], in the land of Edom." If this were a marshy lake close to Egypt, this would certainly be a strange place for Solomon to build his great fleet. But geographers know Elath is a port at the northernmost end of the Gulf of Aqaba.

Notice also Numbers 33, which mentions the stops the Israelites made in the wilderness of the Sinai. After crossing "the sea," they camped in Marah, then Elim. And "they moved from Elim and camped by the Red Sea [yam suph]" (verse 10). How could they have crossed a "sea of reeds" and, after many days of travel, still camped by that same "sea of reeds"? No body of water in the region except the Red Sea would have been enough for the Israelites to have traveled so long and still be close to its coast. Other references that support the Red Sea are Numbers 21:4 and Jeremiah 49:21.

Which route did the Israelites take, and at what point did they cross the sea? We cannot know for sure. However, one author of several works on biblical history offers this perspective: "The

crossing of Israel . . . cannot be explained as a wading through a swamp. It required a mighty act of God, an act so significant both in scope and meaning that forever after in Israel's history it was the paradigm against which all of his redemptive and saving work was measured" (Eugene Merrill, Kingdom of Priests, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 66).

Archaeology and the Book of Joshua: The Conquest

In earlier chapters, we examined archaeological finds that illuminate portions of the biblical books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In this chapter we continue that series, focusing on the book of Joshua, which chronicles Israel's entrance into the Promised Land.

After wandering in the desert for 40 years, the Israelites were finally permitted to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. Moses was about to die, and God instructed him: "Behold, the days approach when you must die; call Joshua, and present yourselves in the tabernacle of meeting, that I may inaugurate him" (Deuteronomy 31:14). Shortly afterwards, Joshua was named as the new leader, and Moses died on top of Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy 34:1, 5). Thus begins the story of the Israelite conquest of Canaan.

Debated dates at Jericho

"Now Jericho was securely shut up because of the children of Israel; none went out, and none came in" (Joshua 6:1).

The first city the Israelites faced was Jericho. According to the archaeological evidence, it is one of the oldest settlements in the world. How accurate is the biblical description of Jericho's destruction?

The question spurred a lively debate throughout this century after several major excavations of the city took place.

The first extensive dig employing modern techniques was conducted by British archaeologist John Garstang in the 1930s. After six years of excavations he reported:

"In a word, in all material details and in date the fall of Jericho took place as described in the Biblical narrative. Our demonstration is limited, however, to material observations: the walls fell, shaken apparently by earthquake, and the city was destroyed by fire, about 1400 B.C." ("Jericho and the Biblical Story," Wonders of the Past, Wise, New York, 1937, p. 1222).

In the 1950s Garstang's conclusion was rejected by another British archaeologist, Kathleen Kenyon. She placed the destruction of this stage of the city 150 years earlier than Joshua's time and believed that no 15th-century city existed for him to conquer. This argument lent support to many scholars who dismissed the biblical story as a myth. Archaeologist and pottery expert Bryant Wood observed: "Scholars by and large [had] written off the Biblical record as so much folklore and religious rhetoric. And this is where the matter has stood for the past 25 years" (Biblical Archaeology Review, March-April 1990, p. 49).

Evidence examined and evaluated

Unfortunately, Kathleen Kenyon died before her work could be published, making careful evaluation of her reports difficult. Fifteen years later her findings were published, and the task fell to Bryant Wood to methodically review them.

After studying her work and taking into account new discoveries, his startling conclusion was that Kenyon had been completely wrong on her date of the fall of Jericho. He found a direct correlation between the archaeological evidence and the biblical account.

What led to such a turnabout?

First was the use of a tool not available in Kenyon's days-radioactive dating. When a piece of charcoal from the burned city was examined by carbon-14 testing-generally reliable for materials up to 4,000 years old-it yielded the date of 1410 B.C., almost precisely the time of the conquest and burning of Jericho as determined from biblical chronology. (According to 1 Kings 6:1, Solomon's temple was inaugurated 480 years after the Exodus, which would place this event at approximately 1443 B.C. After 40 years in the wilderness, the Israelites would have entered the Promised Land around 1403 B.C.)

Concerning the evidence that the city was incinerated, Kenyon found a layer of ash and burnt debris a yard thick in this level of the city. "The destruction was complete," she reported. "Walls and floors were blackened or reddened by fire . . . In most rooms the fallen debris was heavily burnt . . ." ("Excavations at Jericho," Palestinian Exploration Quarterly, 1955, p. 370).

This description of the devastation fits the biblical account of the fate of the city: Israel "burned the city and all that was in it with fire" (Joshua 6:24).

Moreover, evidence included three Egyptian scarabs-beetle-shaped amulets- discovered in a cemetery inside the city. These bore the names of three pharaohs who ruled from 1500 to the 1380s B.C. Such dates clearly contradict Kenyon's belief that the city had been abandoned around 1550 B.C.

Biblical details confirmed

A third type of evidence was the unusual amount of stored grain found in the ruins of Jericho. "The most abundant item found in the destruction apart from pottery," says Wood, "was grain . . . In her limited excavation area, Kenyon recovered six bushels of grain in one season! This is unique in the annals of Palestinian archaeology. The presence of these grain stores in the city is entirely consistent with the Biblical account. The city did not fall as a result of a starvation siege, as was so common in ancient times. Instead, the Bible tells us, Jericho was destroyed after but seven days (Joshua 6:15, 20).

"Successful attackers normally plundered valuable grain once they captured a city. This of course would be inconsistent with the grain found here. But in the case of Jericho the Israelites were told that 'the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction,' and were commanded, 'Keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction' (Joshua 9:17-18). So the Israelites were forbidden to take any plunder from Jericho. This could explain why so much grain was left to burn when [the city] met its end" (Biblical Archaeology Review, March-April 1990, p. 56).

Finally, the type of pottery found confirmed the traditional date of the conquest, since some bore a style that appeared only during the period of 1450-1400 B.C. Wood concludes: "Despite my disagreements with Kenyon's major conclusion, I nevertheless applaud her for her careful and painstaking field work . . . Her thoroughgoing excavation methods and detailed reporting of her findings, however, did not carry over into her analytical work.

"When the evidence is critically examined there is no basis for her contention that City IV [the level corresponding to a violent destruction and burning of the city] was destroyed by the Hyksos or Egyptians in the mid-16th century B.C.E. The pottery, stratigraphic considerations, scarab data and a Carbon-14 date all point to a destruction of the city around the end of Late Bronze I, about 1400 B.C.E. Garstang's original date for this event appears to be the correct one!" (ibid., p. 57).

When Time magazine published an article about these new conclusions on Jericho, the evidence appeared so convincing that Time writers remarked, "Score one for the Bible" (Michael D. Lemonick, Time, March 5, 1990, p. 43).

Unusual remains discovered

"Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: 'an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool.' And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings" (Joshua 8:30-31).

The barren region of Mount Ebal had lain undisturbed for centuries. In 1982 a team of archaeologists began to scratch its surface. This was in the West Bank area and had not been explored until 1967, when Israel occupied the territory.

Adam Zertal, an Israeli archaeologist, supervised the excavation of a strange mound found on top of Mount Ebal. Slowly, after months of work, the site began to yield its secrets.

It was a rectangular structure made of large, uncut stones with a ramp leading to the center. It was quite a massive formation, 28 feet by 24 feet and 9 feet tall. Inside the construction was a fill of ashes, rocks, dirt, potsherds and animal bones. More than 4,000 animal bones were found and sent to a laboratory for analysis.

At first Zertal thought the structure had been a farmhouse, but it had no doors and no floor. All the houses in that period had floors, even if only of compressed earth.

From nearby Jerusalem came the analysis of the animal bones. Almost all of them were from bulls, sheep and goats, precisely the animals prescribed for sacrifice in the book of Leviticus. None of the bones came from typical farm animals that the Bible defines as unclean-horses, donkeys, pigs, dogs and cats. After further examination, this did not look like the remains of a farmhouse at all. What could it be?

Based on four more years of excavations, Zertal finally completed the picture of the structure. The resulting illustration bore a striking resemblance to the biblical specifications of an altar.

As per God's instruction, the stone ramp did not have steps: "And if you make Me an altar of

stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it. Nor shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it" (Exodus 20:25-26). This was a precaution so the priest's tunic would not expose his legs as he ascended the altar.

Also, the Bible describes an altar with four surrounding walls and completely filled with earth and rocks. On top of this fill a fire could be lighted for the sacrifice. This is precisely what was found.

Around this altar Zertal discovered a small wall that apparently served to define a perimeter of an area for many people to congregate. He concluded that this area was a prototype of an Israelite worship center with an altar and an open-air meeting place. He thinks this could be the altar built by Joshua at Mount Ebal (Biblical Archaeological Review, January-February 1986).

On God's instructions Moses had said: "Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime. And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them. You shall build with whole stones the altar of the LORD your God, and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God. You shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 27:4-7).

Therefore, there is strong evidence that God's orders were solemnly carried out by Joshua. An altar at Mount Ebal was built with the unusual specifications of uncut stones and a ramp instead of steps. At this site only remains of animals biblically approved for sacrifice were found.

Future chapters will examine other archaeological finds that confirm and illuminate biblical history.

Archaeology and the Book of Judges

Previous chapters have examined archaeological finds that illuminate sections of the five biblical books of Moses and the book of Joshua. In this chapter we focus on a tumultuous time in ancient Israel's history, the era covered by the book of Judges.

Judges begins by describing the settlement of the Israelite tribes in Canaan. The aged Joshua distributes the territory among the tribes. A short while later he dies at the age of 110 (Judges 2:8). Then comes a period during which faithful elders who had lived over from Joshua's time governed Israel. When they died, no leader immediately succeeded them. A dangerous political void existed.

Many among the younger generation, born in the land of Canaan, had largely forgotten the miracles accomplished during Moses' and Joshua's time. "When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10).

The new generation found itself surrounded by many Canaanites who adhered to their own popular religion. Instead of eliminating this foreign influence, as God had commanded, in many instances the Israelites simply coexisted with those holding false beliefs. God had warned them what would occur if this situation were allowed to continue: "Then the Angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said: 'I led you up from Egypt and brought you to the land of which I swore to your fathers; and I said, "I will never break My covenant with you. And you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars." But you have not obeyed My voice. Why have you done this? Therefore I also said, "I will not drive them before you; but they shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you"' " (Judges 2:1-3).

During this period of more than 300 years, God periodically raised up judges—we find at least 12 of them described in the biblical account—to rescue and rule over Israel as the Israelites struggled with indigenous peoples over control of the land. Judges ruled simultaneously with each other in various regions of Israel. The surviving Canaanites frequently attacked and reconquered territory taken by the Israelites.

What does the archaeological evidence reveal about this time?

A change in cultures

The extensive scientific evidence points to a gradual change from a Canaanite building-and-pottery culture to a less-advanced Israelite cultural style.

Charles Fensham, a professor of Semitic languages, argues that "archaeology has shown that [around] 1200 B.C. certain cities in Palestine were demolished. A flowering culture of Late Bronze [Canaanite] was obliterated. The new developments . . . were of a lower culture than the preceding. The break is thus obvious and points to seminomadic groups in process of settling down. This evidence is clearly to be connected with the invading Israelite tribes" (The

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, Vol. II, p. 1158).

This is consistent with the biblical record, which shows that the Israelites, initially slaves in Egypt and culturally impoverished, at first simply took over the existing Canaanite cities as they conquered them. God had told them, "So it shall be, when the LORD your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant—when you have eaten and are full—then beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

Gradual replacement

The book of Judges indicates that this cultural change was gradual. "And it came to pass, when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites under tribute, but did not completely drive them out" (Judges 1:28). The Canaanite culture survived for many years until the Israelites finally replaced it.

"The Israelites had lived in Egypt as enslaved [people], and then spent 40 years as seminomads before entering Canaan; this makes it unlikely that they brought a distinctive material culture into Canaan . . . At the end of the Late Bronze Age and the start of the Iron Age, around 1200 B.C., a major change occurred in settlement patterns [in Canaan] . . . While we do not believe the new settlements mark the arrival of the Israelites, we are still happy to call them 'Israelite' settlements. This is because, in our view, the Israelites had been in the land for some two centuries by 1200 B.C. and were therefore involved in the changes that took place at that time" (John Bimson and David Livingston, "Redating the Exodus," Biblical Archaeological Review, September-October 1987, pp. 52-53). Here, then, is additional evidence from archaeology that appears to confirm the biblical account. It shows a gradual supplanting of Canaanite culture by Israelite settlers.

Worship of Baal and Asherah

After Joshua's generation had died out, "the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals, and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths" (Judges 2:11-13).

Why the seemingly irresistible tendency for the Israelites to worship Baal over Yahweh? Again, archaeology sheds much light on the Canaanite religion and helps us understand the deadly allure the indigenous religious practices held for the Israelites.

In 1929 excavations began in Ras Shamra (the ancient port town of Ugarit) in northern Lebanon. This work continues. The remains of a palace discovered in the first year of excavation yielded a library containing hundreds of ancient documents that provided a wealth of information about the Canaanite religion. What did these tablets reveal? "The texts show the degrading results of the worship of these deities; with their emphasis on war, sacred

prostitution, sensuous love and the consequent social degradation" (The New Bible Dictionary, Tyndale House Publishers, 1982, p. 1230).

Forbidden worship

The pagan religion was enticing to the Israelites for two primary reasons. First, it was not as morally demanding as the biblical religion. Second, the Israelites fell victim to a superstitious respect for the gods that supposedly controlled the land of the Canaanites.

"The Canaanite religion was completely different from the Israelite. So far, no evidence has been found in Canaanite culture of a series of rules of conduct similar to the Ten Commandments . . . It was a great temptation for the Israelite invaders to respect the existing gods of the land which were regarded as being responsible for the country's fertility. In addition, the worship of these gods was much less demanding than the rigid Israelite laws and rituals. Consequently, many of God's people yielded to this temptation. The result was a gradual moral decline of the nation" (The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible, Lion Publishers, 1983, p. 153).

Recognizing the great danger to fledgling Israel, God insisted that His people destroy every aspect of the degenerate native religion. "According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe my judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 18:3-4).

"And you shall not let any of your descendants pass through the fire [be sacrificed] to Molech . . . You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination . . . Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants" (verses 21-25).

Sexual perversion as religion

The corruption found expression in grotesque cultic sexual practices. "The pagan world of the ancient Near East worshipped and deified sex." So intertwined were sex and religion that "the term 'holy ones' [was used] for its cult prostitutes" (Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 79).

Although the details are crude, they reveal why biblical proscriptions against the Canaanite perversions are so pervasive. "[A] ritual involved a dramatization of the myth . . . [and] centered in sexual activity since the rainfall attributed to Baal was thought to . . . fertilize and impregnate the earth with life just as he impregnated Asherah, the goddess of fertility, in the myth. Canaanite religion, then, was grossly sensual and even perverse because it required the services of both male and female cultic prostitutes as the principal actors in the drama.

"Unlike the requirement in Israel, there was no one central sanctuary. Baal could be worshipped wherever there was a place especially visited by the numinous presence of the gods. These places were originally on hills (hence, 'high place') but later could be found in valleys or even within the cities and towns" (Eugene Merrill, Kingdom of Priests, Baker Book House, 1987, pp.

160-161).

Infants sacrificed to Molech

Included in these Canaanite practices was child sacrifice, described in the Bible as having children to "pass through the fire to Molech" (Jeremiah 32:35). The Ras Shamra tablets also mention the god Molech. Some unrighteous kings in Israel instituted the practice of sacrificing infants to Molech. God, through the prophet Jeremiah, denounced this ghastly ritual. "For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight," and "they have built the high places of Tophet [related to Molech worship] . . . to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart" (Jeremiah 7:30-31).

In the ancient Phoenician city of Carthage—part of the Canaanite culture—some 20,000 urns containing the remains of sacrificed children were found. The archaeologists at the site apprise us that "the Carthaginian Tophet is the largest of these Phoenician sites and indeed is the largest cemetery of sacrificed humans ever discovered. Child sacrifice took place there almost continuously for a period of nearly 600 years" (Lawrence Stager and Samuel Wolff, Biblical Archaeological Review, January-February 1984, p. 32).

Kleitarchos, a Greek from the third century B.C., described this sacrifice as the heating up of a bronze statue with outstretched arms. Infants placed into these red-hot arms quickly perished.

Struggle for a nation's heart

Obviously, God did not want the Israelites to destroy their own offspring. When righteous kings such as Josiah ascended the throne, they obeyed God and abolished the practice. "And he defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom [in Jerusalem], that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire to Molech" (2 Kings 23:10).

Some might think the prophets were overly harsh in condemning the Canaanite religion. Yet now, with detailed evidence of Canaanite practices found by archaeologists in this century, it is clear why the prophets were uncompromising.

"The prophets and chroniclers tended to be thought of as men who, in their zeal for Yahweh and their anger against foreign religions, had probably gone too far," writes one author. "This objection was leveled at the Bible right up to the present day . . . With us it is accepted as a matter of course that every half civilized community controls the morality of its citizens. But in Canaan in those days the cult of sensuality was regarded as the worship of the gods, men and women prostitutes ranked as 'sacred' to the followers of the religion, the rewards for their 'services' went into the temple treasuries as 'offerings for the god.'

"The last thing the prophets and chroniclers did was to exaggerate. How well founded their harsh words were has only become fully understood since the great discoveries of Ras Shamra . . . What temptation for a simple shepherd folk, what perilous enticement! . . . Without its stern moral law, without its faith in one God, without the commanding figures of its prophets, Israel would never have been able to survive this struggle with the Baals, with the religions of the fertility goddesses, with the Asherim and the high places" (Werner Keller, The Bible as History,

Bantam Books, New York, 1980, pp. 286, 289).

Thus the periodic backsliding of Israel into Baal worship described in the book of Judges is a realistic depiction. The description draws support from the archaeological finds that document the struggle for the soul of Israel. God persevered in sending His messengers to warn His people of the dangers of Baalism. An apt description of this struggle was penned by Nehemiah:

"And they took strong cities and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all goods, cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat, and delighted themselves in Your great goodness. Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You, cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets, who testified against them to turn them to Yourself; and they worked great provocations.

"Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who oppressed them; and in the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard from heaven; and according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers [judges] who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest, they again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies . . . Yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies" (Nehemiah 9:25-28).

A nation's early years

The book of Judges is not just documentation of ancient victories and heroic acts. It represents a realistic description of a fledgling nation that began to assimilate the perverse culture of its defeated foes. The book candidly reveals Israel's struggle—not always successful—against the barbaric Canaanite religion. It explains Israel's frequent relapses and resultant humiliating defeats at the hands of its enemies. Through it all one constant factor shows through: God, who is concerned about the moral and spiritual life of His people.

Future chapters will examine additional archaeological finds that confirm and help us understand the biblical record.

The First Mention of Israel

During most of the last century, many liberal critics believed the history of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament was little more than the fabrication of later Jews from around the sixth century B.C. For instance, they believed there was no solid evidence of Israel being a nation at the time of the events described in the biblical book of Judges.

Yet, in 1896, British archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie found evidence of Israel's existence as far back as 1200 B.C., precisely the time of the events in Judges. In the ruins of an Egyptian temple, he discovered a monument that narrated the military victories of Merneptah, an Egyptian pharaoh. In this beautifully carved pillar, dated around 1207 B.C., the monarch mentions the nation of Israel.

For this reason the monument, technically termed a stele, is called "the Israel Stele." It can be seen in the Cairo Museum. On it Merneptah recorded his victories in Canaan and mentioned Israel as one of his vanquished enemies. This would place the battle during the time of the judges of Israel, when Israel was continually being attacked and invaded by nearby peoples and then liberated by the judges God chose and used to deliver His people.

In the last two lines of the text, the stele mentions four of Merneptah's defeated foes in Canaan: "Ashkelon has been overcome. Gezer has been captured. Yanoam was made non-existent. Israel is laid waste, [and] his seed is not."

The reign of Merneptah is dated around 1212-1202 B.C. By recording his victory over Israel, Merneptah shows that during this time the Israelites were already in possession of the central portion of the land.

Of the other places mentioned on the monument, Ashkelon was one of the coastal cities of the recently arrived Philistines. Gezer and Yanoam were in the lowlands, still under the possession of the Canaanites. As recorded in the Bible, Gezer was not conquered by the Israelites under Joshua. "Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer among them" (Judges 1:29). Thus Merneptah's statement corroborates that this city was not in Israelite territory.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia sums up the findings: "Among Merneptah's conquests in Syria-Palestine is Ysr'r (Egyptian for Y´sr'l), clearly recognizable as 'Israel' . . . Thus the Israel Stele provides a terminus ad quem [limit from which to date] for the presence of the Israelites in Palestine . . ." (Eerdman's, Grand Rapids, 1986, Vol. 3, p. 324).

King David's Reign: A Nation United

In earlier chapters, we examined archaeological discoveries that confirm and help us better understand the biblical accounts in the five books of Moses and Israel's history as recorded in Joshua and Judges. In this chapter we focus on the beginning of the Israelite monarchy, the time of King David. The Bible discusses this period in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles.

When the period described in the book of Judges ended, a new age arrived with the kings of Israel, an era lasting more than 400 years. (It came to a tragic close with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah both being taken into captivity and exile.)

The monarchy lacked an auspicious beginning. God eventually rejected Saul, the first king, because of his continual disobedience. David, the son of Jesse, replaced Saul.

David's reign began the golden age of Israel. This powerful king wisely governed the tribes of Israel, forging them into a unified nation. God blessed this obedient and multitalented man. David was not only a valiant soldier, but a great military strategist, able administrator, diplomat, composer and musician.

Under David's inspired leadership, Israel soon became powerful, extending its northern frontiers to the River Euphrates and its southern borders to the Red Sea. "And David defeated Hadadezer king of Zobah as far as Hamath, as he went to establish his power by the River Euphrates ... So David reigned over all Israel, and administered judgment and justice to all his people" (1 Chronicles 18:3, 14).

After centuries of Israelite struggle against the Canaanites and Philistines, it was David who finally triumphed decisively over Israel's enemies. The ensuing peace freed the Israelites to make full use of the formidable natural resources of the area. This liberty produced great prosperity. From their humble beginning as a slave people, then as pastoral tribes, they ascended to great heights. David transformed Israel into a highly organized state that would later leave a lasting mark on Western civilization.

"The reign of David," comments one authority, "marks-politically speaking-Israel's golden age. A power vacuum in both Egypt and Mesopotamia made it possible for the tribes that had entered Canaan under Joshua a few centuries earlier to become a mighty nation ... David was king of an area extending from the Red Sea to the Euphrates" (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, Vol. II, p. 915).

With the flourishing of the material culture of Israel comes enough physical evidence of Israelitish presence to be confirmed by archaeology.

"The purpose of Biblical archaeology," explains archaeologist Bryant Wood, "is to enhance our comprehension of the Bible, and so its greatest achievement, in my view, has been the extraordinary illumination of ... the time of the Israelite monarchy, c. 1000-586 B.C.E. ... [whereas] exploring that prehistory [the premonarchic age] is challenging: It requires tracing the archaeological record of a pastoral community, rather than an agrarian-based political entity [as

in David's time] that built cities and made contacts with surrounding nations" (Biblical Archaeology Review, May-June 1995, pp. 33, 35).

Jerusalem as Israel's new capital

David was originally headquartered in Hebron, in southern Judah, but now, with all 13 tribes accepting his rulership, he needed a central base from which to govern. An ideal place was on the northern border of Judah, the city of Jebus, also called Jerusalem, but it was in the hands of the Jebusites, a remnant Canaanite tribe that had heavily fortified the city. "And David and all Israel went to Jerusalem, which is Jebus, where the Jebusites were, the inhabitants of the land" (1 Chronicles 11:4).

A few centuries earlier, Joshua had attempted to conquer the city of Jebus but had failed. "As for the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the children of Judah could not drive them out; but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Judah at Jerusalem to this day" (Joshua 15:63).

After Joshua's death the Israelites briefly conquered Jerusalem. "Now the children of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it; they struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire" (Judges 1:8). Yet the surviving inhabitants soon rebuilt the city. From that moment they successfully resisted Israelite attacks until the time of David. "But the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who inhabited Jerusalem; so the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day" (Judges 1:21).

The city was built on a mount in the midst of a large valley in the Judean mountains. It seemed impenetrable. When the Jebusites noticed David and his men were ready to attack them, they mocked their feeble efforts. "And the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who spoke to David, saying, 'You shall not come in here; but the blind and the lame will repel you,' ..." (2 Samuel 5:6).

Yet David did not attempt a frontal attack on the fortress. Instead, he found the Achilles' heel of the Jebusite defenses, a hidden water shaft that wound its way up into the city. Such a shaft for transporting water was a common feature of many fortified cities of that time. "As was characteristic of all the great walled cities of Canaan," notes Eugene Merrill, "Jerusalem had a vertical water shaft connecting with a tunnel leading to an underground water supply outside the walls. As necessary as these systems were for the survival of a city under siege, they also constituted a major weakness in that they provided access into the city for anyone who could find the entrance" (Kingdom of Priests, Baker Book House Co., Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 236).

When David discovered the entrance, he realized it was a way to secretly enter the city and open its gates. "Whoever climbs up by way of the water shaft and defeats the Jebusites," he told his men, "shall be chief and captain" (2 Samuel 5:8).

In 1 Chronicles 11:6-7 we find who gained the honor: "And Joab the son of Zeruiah went up first, and became chief. Then David dwelt in the stronghold; therefore they called it the City of David."

More than a century ago Charles Warren, a British officer, found a water shaft in Jerusalem with features similar to those described in the Bible account. Charles Pfeiffer, a professor of ancient literature, explains the significance of the discovery. "The capture of Jerusalem by David is of

interest to archaeologists," he wrote, "since he used a strategy which involved the Gihon Spring, on the eastern slope of Mount Zion ... Joab went up first and was rewarded by becoming commander of David's army...

"This tunnel has been identified with Warren's Shaft. The shaft was dug through the limestone above the Gihon Spring all the way up to the surface, a distance of 24 meters ... The discovery of a Jebusite wall farther down the slope toward the Gihon Spring increases the possibility that Joab could have secretly entered the city ... through Warren's Shaft" (The Biblical World: A Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology, 1966, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, p. 373).

King David's Jerusalem

After David conquered the Jebusite fortress, it became known as the City of David. As his reign prospered he soon began building to extend the city. "Then David dwelt in the stronghold, and called it the City of David. And David built all around from the Millo and inward. So David went on and became great, and the LORD God of hosts was with him" (2 Samuel 5:9-10).

The mount on which the Jebusite fortress stood was called Mount Zion. "Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion (that is, the City of David)" (verse 7). Close by, to the north, was a hill called Mount Moriah, which David bought from Ornan the Jebusite.

"Therefore, the angel of the LORD commanded Gad to say to David that David should go and erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite... So David gave Ornan six hundred shekels of gold by weight for the place. And David built there an altar to the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called on the LORD; and He answered him from heaven by fire on the altar of burnt offering" (1 Chronicles 21:18, 25-26).

Eventually David moved the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant to this area, and later King Solomon built his magnificent temple on Mount Moriah. "Now Solomon began to build the house of the LORD at Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite" (2 Chronicles 3:1).

In Solomon's time the Israelites finally completed an earthwork that filled the area between the two mounts, making them one. The whole area was then called Mount Zion and was no more known as Moriah. "With the establishment of the ark first in the Jebusite fortress and then in the newly built temple," according to one source, "Zion became known as the sacred dwelling place of Israel's Lord, the One 'who dwells in Zion' (Ps. 9:11)" (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1982, Vol. 4, p. 1198).

Eventually Zion would be used not only to denote the temple area, but as a symbol for Jerusalem, its inhabitants and, finally, the people of God.

Confirmation of David's existence

Some historians and critics have questioned the existence of King David and have relegated Old Testament accounts about him to the status of mythology. "I am not the only scholar,"

remarks Philip Davies, "who suspects that the figure of King David is about as historical as King Arthur" (Biblical Archaeology Review, July-August 1994, p. 55). Such professors cast doubt on the reliability of the biblical record and undermine the faith of others. They also rarely acknowledge the many discoveries that have corroborated the biblical account.

For instance, in 1993 archaeologists discovered the names of David and Israel in an inscription carved in stone only 100 years after David's death. Reports Biblical Archaeology Review: "It's not often that an archaeological find makes the front page of the New York Times (to say nothing of Time magazine). But that is what happened last summer to a discovery at Tel Dan, a beautiful mound in northern Galilee, at the foot of Mount Hermon beside one of the headwaters of the Jordan River.

"There Avraham Biran and his team of archaeologists found a remarkable inscription from the ninth century B.C.E. that refers both to the 'House of David' and to the 'King of Israel.' This is the first time that the name David has been found in any ancient inscription outside the Bible" (Biblical Archaeological Review, March-April 1994, p. 26). More and more extrabiblical evidence involving Bible names and places is being discovered as the years go by. The skeptics are gradually having to retreat.

Later another scholar found the name "House of David" in the inscriptions of the famous Moabite Stone, also called the Mesha stela, dated to the ninth century B.C., about 100 years after David's reign. It is hard to understand how David's name could appear in historical records if he were nothing but a later literary creation.

Anson Rainey, professor of ancient Near Eastern cultures, cautions the unwary about believing that the accounts of David and other biblical characters are but legends. "As someone who studies ancient inscriptions in the original, I have a responsibility to warn the lay audience that the new fad, the 'deconstructionist school,' ... is merely a circle of dilettantes. Their view that nothing in Biblical tradition is earlier than the Persian period [540-330 B.C.], especially their denial of the existence of a United Monarchy, is a figment of their vain imagination. The name 'House of David' in the Tel Dan and Mesha inscriptions sounds the death knell to their specious conceit. Biblical scholarship and instruction should completely ignore the 'deconstructionist school.' They have nothing to teach us" (Biblical Archaeology Review, November- December 1994, p. 47).

Although some critics will not admit as much, the accumulating physical evidence confirms rather than denies what is written in God's Word. But, for those who have faith in what God has said in the Bible, it is not necessary to find material remains to corroborate these accounts. The apostle Paul boldly affirms that God "cannot lie" (Titus 1:2).

However, in some cases physical evidence of the events and people described in the Scriptures has survived the ravages of time and serves as a witness to His faithfulness. This comforts and consoles us in our faith, as Paul wrote, "for whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

We will continue to examine archaeological finds that verify the accuracy of the Bible and help us better understand the biblical record.

The Battle at the Pool of Gibeon

In 1956 another remarkable discovery was made that provides additional evidence of the authenticity of the biblical accounts of David's days.

Before David had secured leadership over all the tribes of Israel, Abner, who had been Saul's general, served one of Saul's sons. Abner brought his army to fight David's army, led by Joab. Abner's and Joab's troops met beside a famous water supply of that day called the pool of Gibeon.

"And Joab the son of Zeruiah, and the servants of David, went out and met them by the pool of Gibeon. So they sat down, one on one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. Then Abner said to Joab, 'Let the young men now arise and compete before us.' And Joab said, 'Let them arise.' So they arose and went over by number, twelve from Benjamin, followers of Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and twelve from the servants of David. And each one grasped his opponent by the head and thrust his sword in his opponent's side; so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called the Field of Sharp Swords, which is in Gibeon. So there was a very fierce battle that day, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David" (2 Samuel 2:13-17).

James Pritchard conducted an exploration of this site from 1956 to 1962. He discovered 31 jar handles bearing the Hebrew name Gibeon, which confirmed the site. Early in his search archaeologist Pritchard located a round water shaft, 37 feet in diameter, that led to a pool used by the city. This shaft, comments Biblical Archaeology Review, "was cut into the limestone bedrock to a depth of over 82 feet. Also cut into the limestone are a staircase and railing, which wind down to a level floor about halfway to the bottom of the shaft. From there, the stairs drop straight down another 45 feet-to the level of the water table" (May-June 1995, p. 43).

In the same issue archaeologist Bryant Wood concludes: "A large pool at Gibeon is no doubt the pool where the forces of Israel's second king, David, fought under Joab against the forces of Saul's son Ishbosheth under Abner" (p. 33).

This find was listed by Biblical Archaeology Review as one of the top 10 discoveries in biblical archaeology. It reveals yet another example of the accuracy of even the incidental details of the biblical account.

King Solomon's Reign: Israel's Golden Years

In earlier chapters, we discussed various archaeological finds that illuminate and verify the biblical record. In this chapter, we focus on the reign of Solomon, successor of David as king of Israel.

Once David had consolidated the Israelite empire, under the guidance of God he chose his son Solomon to be his successor. The reign of this young man became truly legendary. Under Solomon's rule Israel reached the pinnacle of wealth and power. Tragically, the glory of Solomon's kingdom barely outlasted his own lifetime.

What has archaeology revealed about King Solomon's reign in the 10th century B.C.? Remarkably, there is much evidence to corroborate the biblical account.

Unusual period of peace

What does the Bible say about the wider international condition during Solomon's time? God had told David: "Behold, a son shall be born to you, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies all around. His name shall be Solomon [meaning 'peaceful'], for I will give peace and quietness to Israel in his days" (1 Chronicles 22:9, emphasis added throughout).

Was this a time of peace in Israel? What do the archaeological records show? From contemporary Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions, we find these once-powerful kingdoms afflicted by military weakness.

Assyria was occupied with constant battles against the Arameans. Internal strife over dynastic disputes further weakened the kingdom. "These Assyrian preoccupations," states Donald Wiseman, professor of Assyriology, "left David and Solomon free to extend their own territory into south Syria. The intruders from the Syrian desert impoverished Assyria under the aged Ashurnasirpal I ..." (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 334). Meanwhile, the Assyrians held the Babylonians in check, blocking any Chaldean intrusion into Israelite territory.

On Israel's southern flank, the Egyptians were also experiencing a general decline. Commenting on the beginning of this long period of weakness, one authority observes: "After the empire [of the previous centuries], Egypt never regained her former dominance in the eastern Mediterranean world ... In large part this foreign weakness arose from domestic weakness. Egypt kept breaking up into smaller states ... From the time of Samuel to the fall of the kingdom of Israel, Egypt was normally in a state of divided weakness" (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Abingdon, Nashville,1962, Vol. 2, p. 52).

This international backdrop is faithfully reflected in the biblical account. In fact, the weak priestly dynasty ruling Egypt made great concessions to Solomon because of his increasing power and influence.

Opinion among scholars is divided over which pharaoh was Solomon's contemporary. Eugene Merrill believes it was Siamun. "... Siamun soon realized that Solomon was to be ruler of a kingdom which would rival or even exceed his own in power and influence. He therefore decided it was to his best advantage to cultivate amicable relations with the young monarch, even to the extent of recognizing him as an equal. That this is the case is clear from his willingness to provide his own daughter as a wife for Solomon, a concession almost without parallel in Egyptian history since it was a candid admission to the world of Egypt's weakness and conciliation. Normally Egyptian kings took foreign princesses but did not give up their own daughters to foreign kings" (Kingdom of Priests, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 292. Compare to David Rohl,A Test of Time: The Bible-From Myth to History, Arrow Books, London, 1996, pp. 173-185).

It is clear from the history of the neighboring countries that an unusual era of peace enveloped Israel, enabling Solomon to greatly develop and enrich his nation through many profitable commercial alliances.

Prosperous alliance with Phoenicia

Not only did Solomon lack foreign enemies, he found a powerful ally in King Hiram, a faithful friend of his father, David.

"Now Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon, because he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father, for Hiram had always loved David ... So the LORD gave Solomon wisdom, as He had promised him; and there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty together" (1 Kings 5:1, 12).

Regarding this treaty, a thousand years later the Jewish historian Josephus noted that copies of this alliance could be read in the public archives in Tyre. "The copies of these epistles," writes Josephus, "remain at this day, and are preserved not only in our books, but among the Tyrians also; insomuch that if any one would know the certainty about them, he may desire of the keepers of the public records of Tyre to shew him them, and he will find what is there set down to agree with what we have said" (Antiquities of the Jews, Book VIII, Chapter II, Section 7).

In Solomon's day, the Israelites were just beginning to clearly define their own culture. To initiate such vast projects as the temple (see G. Ernest Wright, "The Stevens' Reconstruction of the Solomonic Temple," Biblical Archaeologist, Vol. 18, 1955, pp. 41-44), fortified towns and maritime trade, Solomon could have found no more enterprising a people to help than the Phoenicians.

One author explains, "Solomon was a thoroughly progressive ruler. He had a flair for exploiting foreign brains and foreign skill and turning them to his own advantage. That was the secret, otherwise scarcely understandable, of how the [nation] ... developed by leaps and bounds into a first class economic organism. Here also was to be found the secret of his wealth which the Bible emphasises. Solomon imported smelting technicians from Phoenicia. Huram ... , a craftsman from Tyre, was entrusted with the casting of the Temple furnishings (1 Kings 7:13, 14). In Ezion-Geber Solomon founded an important enterprise for overseas trade ... The Phoenicians had behind them practical experience accumulated over many centuries. Solomon therefore sent to Tyre for specialists for his dockyards and sailors for his ships: 'And Hiram sent

in the navy his servants, shipmen that had knowledge of the sea...' (1 Kings 9:27)" (Werner Keller, The Bible As History, Bantam, New York, 1980, pp. 211-212. On Ezion-Geber, see Gary D. Pratico, "Where Is Ezion-Geber?", Biblical Archaeology Review, September/October 1986, pp. 24-35; Alexander Flinder, "Is This Solomon's Seaport?", Biblical Archaeology Review, July/August 1989, pp. 31-42).

Archaeologists who have studied the remains of Solomon's time clearly see the Phoenician influence which the Bible, instead of hiding the facts, candidly admits. "Where the Israelites replaced Canaanite towns, the quality of housing was noticeably poorer," says The New Bible Dictionary, "though standards improved rapidly in the days of David and Solomon, partly through Phoenician influence ... The commonest-type house ... has become known generally as the four-room house, which appears to be an original Israelite concept" (Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1982, p. 490).

Great construction projects

Throughout Israel, Solomon fortified the great cities: "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" (1 Kings 9:15).

Regarding Jerusalem, as long as the Temple Mount is disputed between Arabs and Jews, no excavations are permitted in the immediate area where Solomon's temple existed. But the Bible mentions three other cities that Solomon expanded and fortified. Does any archaeological evidence support the biblical record?

The first city mentioned is Hazor, a northern Israelite habitation that was lost in time until a century ago. The first extensive excavations were done under the direction of archaeologist Yigael Yadin in the 1950s. He writes about Hazor, "What I'm about to say may sound like something out of a detective story, but it's true. Our great guide was the Bible. As an archaeologist, I can't imagine anything more exciting than to work with the Bible in one hand and a spade in the other. This was the real secret of our discovery of the Solomonic period" (Hazor, Random House, New York, 1975, p. 187).

Yadin found the elaborate and sturdy main gate and part of the wall, which archaeologists now call the Solomonic style of architecture. Eventually, he found the same Solomonic-type gate in all three of the cities mentioned in the Bible.

In the most recent excavation of Megiddo in 1993, archaeologists Israel Finkelstein and David Ussishkin report, "The grandeur of Solomon's Megiddo is clearly evident in the archaeological finds at Megiddo-in large palaces, with fine, smooth-faced ashlar masonry and in elaborate decorative stonework" ("Back to Megiddo," Biblical Archaeology Review, January/February 1994, p. 36).

Archaeologist Bryant Wood sums up the discoveries: "Probably the most famous of the architectural finds related to the kingdom period are the early tenth-century 'Solomonic gates' at Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer, built by David's son Solomon ..." ("Scholars Speak Out," Biblical Archaeology Review, May/June 1995, p. 34). So the biblical account accords nicely with the archaeological evidence.

Enter the queen of Sheba

One of the most colorful accounts about Solomon is relegated to myth by some scholars. It concerns the visit of the queen of Sheba.

"Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels that bore spices, very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she spoke with him about all that was in her heart. So Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing so difficult for the king that he could not explain it to her ...

"Then she said to the king: 'It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. However I did not believe the words until I came and saw with my own eyes; and indeed the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard. Happy are your men and happy are these your servants, who stand continually before you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the LORD your God ...' Then she gave the king one hundred and twenty talents of gold, spices in great quantity, and precious stones. There never again came such abundance of spices as the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon" (1 Kings 10:1-10).

This story has been the inspiration for many paintings and movies, but does it have historical backing? Where was the kingdom of Sheba? Until this century, the sands of time very probably covered up much of this great kingdom of the past.

Yet it was well known by some of the classical Greek and Roman writers. "In happy Arabia," wrote Dionysius the Greek in A.D. 90, "you can always smell the sweet perfume of marvelous spices, whether it be incense or wonderful myrrh. Its inhabitants have great flocks of sheep in the meadows, and birds fly in from distant isles bringing leaves of pure cinnamon."

Another Greek historian, Diodorus (100 B.C.), writes: "These people surpass in riches and luxuries not only their Arab neighbors, but also the rest of the world. They drink out of cups made of gold and silver ... The Sabeans enjoy this luxury because they are convinced that riches which come from the earth are the favor of the gods and should be shown to others."

The Roman Emperor Augustus actually sent an army of 10,000 men to southern Arabia to plunder this wealth. But the withering desert and frequent plagues decimated the army before they could arrive in the capital. They never fulfilled their mission.

Scholars generally agree that the kingdom of Sheba is located in the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, now called Yemen. The area is quite isolated and desolate now, but this has not always been the case. "The most prominent of the Arab states ... during the first half of the 1st millennium B.C.," comments The New Bible Dictionary, "Sheba was ruled by mukarribs, priest-kings, who supervised both the political affairs and the polytheistic worship of the sun, moon and star gods. Explorations [in 1950-1953] ... found some outstanding examples of Sabean art and architecture, especially the temple of the moon-god at Marib, the capital, which dates from the 7th century B.C. ..." (p. 1087).

Until this century, this area of Yemen was largely off-limits to archaeologists. Now, up to 4,000 inscriptions of this ancient kingdom have come to light, confirming that one of the four nations in

the area was called Sheba and that the population of at least one of its cities totaled a million.

This part of the world was not always dry and barren. It once had abundant water which irrigated the precious spice crops. The two most popular spices grown were frankincense (a resin of incense) and myrrh. The fragrant perfume of frankincense was used in temples and homes of the rich to ask favors from the gods. Myrrh was an indispensable oil used as a beauty aid to keep the skin smooth and soft, and was also used to embalm the dead. The Magi gave these two valuable spices to the infant Jesus as gifts fit for a newborn king (Matthew 2:11).

The evidence of abundant water in Sheba comes from the remains of a huge dam found in the area, and explains how it could be called "Happy Arabia" by the ancients.

"A gigantic dam blocked the river Adhanat in Sheba," writes Dr. Keller, "collecting the rainfall from a wide area. The water was then led off in canals for irrigation purposes, which was what gave the land its fertility. Remains of this technical marvel in the shape of walls over 60 feet high still defy the sand-dunes of the desert. Just as Holland is in modern times the Land of Tulips, so Sheba was then the Land of Spices, one vast fairy-like scented garden of the costliest spices in the world. In the midst of it lay the capital, which was called Marib. That was until 542 B.C.-then the dam burst. The importunate desert crept over the fertile lands and destroyed them" (The Bible As History, p. 225). This is the present state of most of the country. It has lost much of its fertility due to lack of water.

There is much to explore in this area of ancient Sheba, and it is still a dangerous place to go, but much scientific progress has been made. Investigations continue up to the present time. What the famed archaeologist W.F. Albright remarked about these excavations in 1953 still holds true: "They are in process of revolutionizing our knowledge of Southern Arabia's cultural history and chronology. Up to now the results to hand demonstrate the political and cultural primacy of Sheba in the first centuries after 1000 B.C." (Keller, p. 227).

As time goes by, more archaeological evidence continues to indicate that Solomon's reign was actually as magnificent as the Bible faithfully records.

The Early Kings of Israel: A Kingdom Divided

Recent chapters have covered some of the archaeological evidence that confirms and clarifies the biblical record from Genesis through Solomon's kingdom. We continue the story with the breakup of Israel, looking first at the archaeological evidence for the northern 10 tribes of Israel and their rulers. Later we will direct our attention to the nation of Judah, which outlived the kingdom of Israel by more than a century.

After Solomon's tragic apostasy as a ruler, God removed the blessings of national unity from the tribes of Israel. He had told Jeroboam, the future king of the northern 10 tribes of Israel: "Behold, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and will give ten tribes to you (but he shall have one tribe for the sake of My servant David, and for the sake of Jerusalem ...), because they have forsaken Me, and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians ... and have not walked in My ways to do what is right in My eyes and keep My statutes and My judgments, as did his father David' " (1 Kings 11:31-33).

Around 930 B.C. the united kingdom was divided, with Jeroboam governing the northern 10 tribes and Rehoboam, Solomon's son, governing the two southern ones, Judah and Benjamin. (As priests, a good portion of the tribe of Levi eventually either resettled in or remained with the southern kingdom.) As both of their wicked reigns came to an end—and according to God's prophecies of punishment for disobedience—ominous clouds began to appear over Israel's northern horizon. Assyria began to awaken as a powerful enemy in that region.

Eugene Merrill suggests: "Perceptive observers of the world scene could already discern by 900 [B.C.] the stirrings of the Assyrian giant. Though it would be almost fifty years before they fell beneath its heel, the little kingdoms of the west could hear it coming" (Kingdom of Priests, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 336).

An Abundance of Assyrian Evidence

Once Israel came under Assyria's expanding imperial reach, archaeological evidence attesting to Israel's historical evidence increases. Not only were the Assyrians meticulous recorders of their political, economic and religious life; they also developed an exquisite stone-carving technique, called bas-relief, which records their lives and accomplishments on numerous palace walls.

In the 19th century British archaeologists excavated many of Assyria's principal cities. Nineveh, one of several Assyrian capitals during the history of the empire, has been extensively explored. Archaeologists have even found in one of those capitals a vast library of cuneiform tablets that belonged to one of Assyria's final kings, Ashurbanipal (ca. 669-627 B.C.).

With this wealth of information about Assyrian history, it would be natural to expect some mention of the long relationship between Israel and Assyria, as well as the final Assyrian victory over the northern tribes. This is precisely what has been found.

Omri, King of the House of Israel

After Jeroboam's short-lived dynasty came to an end around 905 B.C., the next dynasty of importance was founded by Omri (881-870 B.C.). He is mentioned in Assyrian monuments for his military exploits and his establishment of Samaria, a vast fortress city that became the capital for the northern tribes. Because of his impressive military and political achievements and Omri's line of powerful successors, the Assyrians would refer to Israel as "the land of Omri" even long after the Omride dynasty had ceased to exist.

"The reputation of Omri won by his achievements," says The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, "is evidenced by the fact that for over a century after his death, Samaria was called in the Assyrian records 'House of Omri' and the land of Israel the 'land of Omri' " (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, p. 601).

Not only is King Omri mentioned in Assyrian records, but he is named on a monument made by one of Israel's eastern neighbors, the Moabites.

The Moabite Stone

More than a century ago an Arab chieftain showed an Anglican missionary a beautiful black monument that had been discovered at Dibon, east of the Jordan River, the region of ancient Moab. This discovery triggered fierce competition among the Western nations, which sought to acquire this Moabite Stone (also called the Mesha Stela), dated to the ninth century B.C. What has survived of the monument is found today in a Paris museum, the Louvre. The monument itself is a record of how King Mesha of Moab rebelled against and finally rolled back Israelite domination of Moab established by King Omri and perpetuated by his son Ahab.

At the beginning of the reign of Omri's grandson, Jehoram, the Moabites sensed opportunity and rebelled. They were successful in gaining independence.

The first few lines of the text records the king's boast: "I am Mesha, son of Kemosh[it], king of Mesha, the Dibonite. My father ruled over Moab for 30 years, and I ruled after my father ... Omri (was) king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab many days ... And his son succeeded him, and he too said: 'I will oppress Moab.'... And Omri had taken possession of the land ... and he dwelt in it in his days and the sumof the days of his sons: 40 years; but [the god] Kamosh restored it in my days" (translated by Andre Lemaire, Biblical Archaeology Review, May-June 1994, p. 33).

Here we find confirmation by Israel's enemies of what is recorded in the biblical narrative. The Bible documents the Moabite rebellion and subsequent independence, but adds what king Mesha failed to explain: that he won their independence only after he had sacrificed his son to their pagan god.

The Bible even relates the pivotal story of that battle in the rebellion. "Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheepbreeder, and he regularly paid the king of Israel [referring first to Omri, then to Ahab and now to his grandson Jehoram] one hundred thousand lambs and the wool of one hundred thousand rams. But it happened that when Ahab died, that the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel ...

"And when the king of Moab saw that the battle was too fierce for him, he took with him seven hundred men who drew swords, to break through to the king of Edom [his ally], but they could not. Then he took his eldest son who would have reigned in his place, and offered him as a burnt offering upon the wall; and there was great indignation against Israel. So they departed from him and returned to their own land" (2 Kings 3:26-27, emphasis added throughout).

King Mesha did triumph, but (perhaps understandably) in the Moabite stone he refrains from any mention of the costly price he paid for independence.

Some critics have doubted the biblical account of King Mesha's human sacrifice, since it seemed far-fetched that a king would offer up his own son and successor to the throne. Yet in 1978 a cuneiform tablet from the Syrian city of Ugarit mentions just this type of sacrifice in times of war. The text said: "O Baal, drive away the force from our gates, the aggressor from our walls ... A firstborn, Baal, we shall sacrifice, a child we shall fulfill."

Baruch Margalit, associate professor of Bible at Haifa University in Israel, explains what was meant in the biblical text by Israel having been "indignant" with Mesha's sacrifice of his son. "The word denotes the psychological breakdown or trauma that affected the Israelite forces when they beheld the sign of human sacrifice atop the walls of Kir-Hareseth. The author of the Ugaritic text apparently anticipated this reaction of mass hysteria when he confidently predicted the withdrawal of the attacking force ... It follows that Mesha's sacrifice of his son, rather than unprecedented, was in fact an integral, if seldom implemented, part of an age-old Canaanite tradition of sacral warfare" (Biblical Archaeology Review, November-December 1986, p. 63).

Ahab's Clash with the Assyrians

Not only did the Assyrians have great respect for King Omri. They also had high regard his son Ahab, who was a skilled and powerful military leader. The Bible, however, is not so much concerned with Ahab's military exploits as with his establishment of Baal worship in Israel after he married the Phoenician king's daughter Jezebel.

States The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: "Ahab followed a wise policy in defense, entering into alliance with Phoenicia, Judah, and even his erstwhile enemies the Arameans. On the other hand, he fell under the influence of his fanatical pagan queen Jezebel, who led him to worship Baal as Yahweh's peer, and consequently to introduce such horrors as tyranny (1 K[ings] 21), religious persecution (18:4), and human sacrifice (16:34)" (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids), 1979, Vol. 1, p. 75, "Ahab").

Although the Bible is quite critical of Ahab's morality, it does acknowledge his military prowess and that he defeated the Arameans and Syrians several times (1 Kings 20:1-30). The Assyrians also record a major battle with Ahab and a coalition of other neighboring states. Although they dealt Ahab's confederation heavy losses, the battle did temporarily halt the Assyrian advance to the west.

"Ahab is mentioned in the Monolith Inscription of Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.), which tells the story of the great battle Shalmaneser fought at Qarqar against an Aramean-Israelite coalition ... Ahab alone is said to have contributed two thousand chariots and ten thousand foot soldiers. Ten lesser kings who took part made important contributions in infantry and cavalry" (ibid., p.

76).

King Ahab's House of Ivory

Archaeologists haven't found only Assyrian evidence for the existence of King Ahab. While excavating Samaria they have found indications of another biblical description connected to Ahab's reign—his house of ivory. The Bible says of Ahab, "Now the rest of the acts of Ahab, and all that he did, the ivory house which he built and all the cities that he built, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel?" (2 Kings 22:39).

Herschel Shanks, editor of Biblical Archaeology Review, writes: "An important ivory find from the Iron Age comes from Ahab's capital in Samaria where over 500 ivory fragments were found ... The Bible speaks of Ahab's 'house of ivory' (1 Kings 22:39). Does this refer to the paneling of the walls or to the furnishings? To put the matter differently, did the ivory fragments found at Samaria decorate the walls of the building or the furniture? There is some evidence from Nimrud that a room in an Assyrian palace was, in fact, paneled with ivory veneer. Was this the case at Samaria? On the basis of the evidence at hand, it is difficult to tell.

"Whether paneling for the wall or decoration for furniture, the houses of ivory—based on a highly sophisticated Phoenician ivory industry—were for the Hebrew prophets symbols of social oppression and injustice; the 'ivory houses' [mentioned in Amos 3.15] were also evidence of participation in the barbarous pagan practices and heathen worship of Phoenicia. Based on the archaeological evidence, the prophets knew what they were talking about" (Biblical Archaeology Review, September-October 1985, p. 46).

Jehu Kneels Before an Assyrian King

Because of the wicked rule of the "house of Omri," God sentenced Ahab, Jezebel and their descendants to death. He would use a general of the Israelite army, Jehu, to accomplish most of these sentences. God told the prophet Elijah: "Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha ... you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall be that whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill" (1 Kings 19:15-17). God would not allow the enormously wicked acts of the House of Omri to go unpunished.

Jehu eventually killed not only Jezebel, but all of Ahab's children, in effect exterminating the dynasty] of Omri. Although Jehu became God's rod of retribution, he failed to purge Israel of all vestiges of false religion.

"Thus Jehu destroyed Baal from Israel. However Jehu did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin, that is, from the golden calves that were at Bethel and Dan. And the Lord said to Jehu, 'Because you have done well in doing what is right in My sight, and have done to the house of Ahab all that was in My heart, your sons shall sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation.' But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart; for he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam, who had made Israel sin. In those days the Lord began to cut off parts of Israel; and Hazael

conquered them in all the territory of Israel ..." (2 Kings 10:28-32).

It was during the spiritual decline of Jehu that Assyria again began directly to threaten Israel. Soon Israel was paying Assyria tribute—protection money—to spare itself warfare and invasion. The Assyrians carved an impressive monument, called the Black Obelisk, to the achievements of King Shalmaneser III. The monument includes detailed panels portraying King Jehu (or his emissary) bringing tribute to the Assyrian king. This elaborate illustration is the earliest known depiction of an Israelite (king or commoner).

This famous monument of the ninth century B.C., now prominently displayed in the British Museum in London, was discovered in 1846 in the Assyrian city of Nimrud. It includes scenes depicting the tribute given to the king and the bearers of that tribute. In the second scene from the top the inscription reads, "Tribute of Iaua [Jehu], son of Omri. Silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden beaker, golden goblets, pitchers of gold, tin, staves for the hand of the king, [and] javelins, I [Shalmaneser] received from him" (Biblical Archaeology Review, January-February 1995, p. 26).

The scene is startling. There before the Assyrian king is either Jehu himself or one of his chief representatives kneeling in submission. The monument, including not only his name but his picture, is remarkable evidence of this biblical king.

Following chapters will continue covering archaeological discoveries relating to the later kings of the house of Israel. It is astonishing how much evidence supporting the biblical record has been uncovered by the spade of diligent archaeologists.

The Later Kings of Israel: A Kingdom's Downfall

The last chapter presented archaeological evidence that confirms and clarifies the biblical record of the early kings of the northern 10 tribes of Israel after the death of Solomon. We continue the story with the later kings and downfall of the kingdom.

We come to the final stages of the northern kingdom (Israel) as a nation. Jehu's downfall came at the halfway mark of Israel's 19 kings and, tragically, the kings who followed him would all refuse to repent and turn to the true God. Meanwhile, Judah remained more faithful to God and continued for more than a century after the fall of the northern 10 tribes of Israel. Much archaeological evidence validates the account of Israel's final years.

Another King Jeroboam

Jehu's great-grandson, Jeroboam II, although evil, was an able military leader. Eugene Merrill explains that through his political leadership "Jeroboam was able not only to recover the territories of Israel proper which had fallen over the years to Damascus, but to bring all of south Aram and the Transjordan back under Israelite hegemony (2 Kings 14:25-28)" (A Kingdom of Priests, 1987, p. 374).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the German Oriental Society mounted an extensive archaeological dig of Megiddo, the site of an important northern-kingdom stronghold. The excavations produced a beautiful agate seal depicting a roaring lion. The Hebrew inscription read, "Belonging to Shema, servant of Jeroboam." From the dating of the city level, certain archaeologists proposed the king referred to was Jeroboam II (791-751 B.C.).

It is not uncommon for seals to appear in excavations in the Middle East. Bible commentator William Barclay explains: "It was not the signature [as we use today], but the seal that authenticated. In commercial and political documents it was the seal, imprinted with the signet ring, which made the document valid; it was the seal which authenticated a will; it was the seal on the mouth of a sack or a crate that guaranteed the contents. Seals were made of pottery, metal or jewels. In the British Museum there are seals of most of the Assyrian kings. The seal was fixed on clay and the clay attached to the document" (Daily Study Bible Commentary, Bible Explorer, Epiphany Software, San Jose, Calif.).

Since seals were durable and vital for political and commercial transactions, they were produced in abundance for the upper classes of society. As we see in this series, several seals have been found that include the names of monarchs mentioned in the Bible.

Collapse of a Dynasty

Meanwhile, true to God's prediction, Jehu's dynasty lasted only "to the fourth generation" (2 Kings 10:30). Jeroboam II was of Jehu's third generation. His son, Zechariah, the fourth successor, was assassinated during his first year as king. From then on, because of ever-increasing evils on a national scale, Israel could no longer count on God's protection. The

nation plunged headlong into a free fall of lawlessness and disregard for God.

"In the thirty-eighth year of Azariah king of Judah, Zechariah the son of Jeroboam reigned over Israel in Samaria six months. And he didevil in the sight of the Lord, as his fathers had done; he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. Then Shallum the son of Jabesh conspired against him, and struck and killed him in front of the people; and he reigned in his place ... This was the word of the Lord which He spoke to Jehu, saying, 'Your sons shall sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation. And so it was' "(2 Kings 15:8-12).

So, after almost 90 years, Jehu's dynasty came to a violent end. From then on, assassinations and political instability would be the rule until the final collapse of the northern kingdom. This military and political weakness would make the Israelites in the north an easy prey for the resurgent Assyrian Empire.

It is sad to reflect on how this once-mighty kingdom, which had halted the Assyrian war machine a century earlier, could muster hardly any resistance (except during the reign of Jeroboam II). According to an Assyrian inscription, King Ahab had contributed "two thousand chariots and ten thousand foot soldiers" to form a successful military coalition to stop the Assyrian advance. A century later, when the Assyrian menace appeared again, the northern Israelite armies were reduced to "fifty horsemen, ten chariots, and ten thousand foot soldiers; for the king of Syria had destroyed them" (2 Kings 13:7).

Shallum, the assassin of King Azariah, lasted only a month on the throne before he, too, was murdered. "Shallum the son of Jabesh became king ... and he reigned a full month in Samaria. For Menahem the son of Gadi went up from Tirzah, came to Samaria, and struck Shallum the son of Jabesh in Samaria and killed him; and he reigned in his place" (2 Kings 15:13-15).

Assyria Gains Control

Menahem reigned for 10 years but could not resist the advancing Assyrian army. To avoid outright conquest, he began paying the Assyrians tribute. "And he did evil in the sight of the Lord ... Pul [Tiglath-pileser] king of Assyria came against the land; and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that his hand might be with him to strengthen the kingdom under his control ... So the king of Assyria turned back, and did not stay there in the land" (2 Kings 15:18-20).

The Assyrians, who meticulously recorded their kings' triumphs, mentioned the tribute money given by King Menahem. The annals show the amazing accuracy of the biblical account. "The outstanding event of Menahem's reign," notes The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, "was the supremacy of Assyrian power in the West. This is confirmed in detail from Assyrian sources ... When Tiglath-pileser III of Assyrian took the throne of Babylon in 729, he assumed the name Pulu [Pul in the Bible] ... In his annals Tiglath-pileser records the receiving of tribute from various nations of the West—Menahem of Samaria, Rezin of Damascus, Hiram of Tyre, etc. A fragmentary text adds further details about Menahem. 'He was overwhelmed like a snowstorm and fled like a bird, alone, and bowed to the feet of his conqueror, who returned him to his place and imposed tribute upon him' " (Vol. III, 1962, p. 348).

Menahem's son, Pekahiah, ruled for only two years before he was murdered by Pekah. Once on the throne, Pekah rebelled against the Assyrians and refused to pay tribute money. "With Pekahiah out of the way," Eugene Merrill writes, "Pekah proclaimed himself king and immediately broke the treaty with Assyria which Menahem had made. He no doubt felt safe in doing so because Tiglath-pileser was still detained elsewhere with matters of imperial responsibility ... Whatever Pekah's objective, he was doomed to disappointment for within six years (by 734) Tiglath-pileser returned to the west and quickly began to annex vast areas of Syria and Palestine, especially in Galilee and the Transjordan" (Merrill, p. 396).

Tiglath-pileser's Invasion

The Bible records the story of the invasion of Tiglath-pileser in 2 Kings 15:29-30: "In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and took Ijon ... Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried them captive to Assyria. Then Hoshea the son of Elah led a conspiracy against Pekah ... and killed him; so he reigned in his place ..."

The biblical account is corroborated in an Assyrian victory stela, or inscribed, commemorative stone (also spelled "stele"), of Pulu (Tiglath-pileser). The Assyrian king boasts, "The House of Omri [Israel] ... all of its inhabitants and goods, I took to Assyria. They overthrew their king Pekah and I installed Hoshea as their king. I received from them ten talents of gold, a thousand talents of silver as tribute and I deported them to Assyria" (Archaeological Bible Commentary, 1984, p. 133).

This began a 15-year period during which the northern Israelites were forcibly deported from their homeland to Assyrian territory. Few would remain in the land when the Assyrians were through.

Amos, one of the prophets of that time, revealed what God would allow to happen to the northern tribes. "Thus says the Lord: 'As a shepherd takes from the mouth of a lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the children of Israel be taken out who dwell in Samaria' " (Amos 3:12).

The Conquest of Samaria

The Assyrian records again confirm the biblical account, although they show a bias that is absent in Scripture. We see a marked contrast between the boisterous claims of the Assyrian kings—who never admitted to losing any battles—and the biblical narrative, which is frank and honest about their kings' moral lapses and sins and their resulting defeats.

Writing for Biblical Archaeology Review, Erika Bleibtreu observes: "According to the narrative representation on these reliefs, the Assyrians never lost a battle. Indeed, no Assyrian soldier is ever shown wounded or killed. The benevolence of the gods is always bestowed on the Assyrian king and his troops. Like the official written records, the scenes and figures are selected and arranged to record the king's heroic deeds and to describe him as 'beloved of the gods' " (January-February 1991, p. 57).

What a stark contrast with the biblical account of the defeat and downfall of Israel, also known as Samaria. "Now the king of Assyria went throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria and

besieged it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God ... and they had feared other gods, and had walked in the statutes of the nations whom the Lord had cast out from before the children of Israel ..." (2 Kings 17:5-8).

The Assyrian records also mention the conquest of Samaria by King Shalmaneser V, Tiglath-pileser's son. But this king died unexpectedly during the siege of Samaria, and his son, Sargon II, completed the job.

In 1843 Paul Emil Botta uncovered the ruins of Sargon´s palace, where a wall relief called "The Display Inscription" records Sargon's victory over Samaria. In it Sargon boasted: "At the beginning of my rule, in my first year of reign, I besieged and conquered Samaria ... I led away into captivity 27,290 people who lived there ... I caused others to take their portion. People of the lands, prisoners my hand had captured, I settled there. My officials I placed over them as governors."

Reasons for Israel's Downfall

The Bible states some of the reasons for the Israelites' removal: They "caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil ... Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone" (2 Kings 17:17-18).

Years later, after Judah likewise fell into captivity, God gave through the prophet Ezekiel additional reasons for the destruction and exile of both nations. "Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them" (Ezekiel 22:26).

The prophecy compares the priests to wild beasts: "Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain. Her prophets plastered them with untempered mortar, seeing false visions, and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord God,' when the Lord had not spoken" (verse 28).

"The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads," says the Lord God" (verses 29-31).

Epilogue: Where Did Israel Go?

What happened to the Israelites after they were deported into Assyria? Most people think the 10 northern tribes of Israel have disappeared forever. They are often referred to as "the lost 10 tribes." The scholarly consensus is that these people were either assimilated by gentile nations

or simply died out altogether.

But what does God's Word have to say about their fate? Through the prophets, God depicts them as wandering until His will and plan could be brought to completion. The prophet Amos said: "Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth; yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the Lord. For surely I will command, and will sift the house of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground" (Amos 9:8-9, emphasis added throughout).

According to Amos's prophecy, the descendants of these Israelites were fated to wander among the nations until they fulfilled their destiny. God would know exactly where they would be found, for they would not disappear as a people, and He promised not to forget them.

God also prophesied: "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' there it shall be said to them, 'You are sons of the living God.' Then the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and appoint for themselves one head; and they shall come up out of the land. For great will be the day of Jezreel [at the time of Christ's coming]!" (Hosea 1:10-11).

God's plans include the "lost 10 tribes" of Israel as well as Judah, the descendants of the southern kingdom of Judah who include modern-day Jews. After Christ returns to earth, say many biblical prophecies, He will gather their descendants and bring them back to their ancestral homeland.

Isaiah prophesied of a second exodus of these peoples from the house of Israel and the house of Judah: "And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse [Jesus Christ], who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people ... and will assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather together the dispersed of Judah ... There will be a highway for the remnant of His people who will be left from Assyria, as it was for Israel in the day that he came up from the land of Egypt" (Isaiah 11:10-16).

In the next chapter, we will examine what archaeology tells us about the nation of Judah, which outlived the kingdom of Israel by more than a century.

The Early Kings of Judah: Miraculous Deliverance

In the last two chapters, we covered the history of the kings of Israel after the northern 10 tribes broke ties with the kingdom of Judah, comprised of two tribes in the south. We now turn to see what archaeology has revealed about the kings of Judah during this time.

Around 720 B.C. the Assyrians conquered the northern tribes of Israel and expelled them from their land. But Judah, Israel's sister nation in the south, miraculously survived the Assyrian invasion and continued for another 130 years.

Although the people of Judah, too, would later succumb to invasion—this time from the Babylonians—they managed to survive their ordeal with their national identity intact, unlike their kinsmen in the kingdom of Israel. After 70 years of exile in Babylon, a remnant of Judah returned to its former land. There descendants of this remnant would remain for another 600 years until the Romans finally expelled them. For nearly 2,000 years the Jews would be dispersed around the world. Finally, in this century, some of their descendants returned to the ancient land of Judah. They named their nation Israel, although "Judah" would have been more historically accurate.

What has archaeology revealed about these resilient people from the southern kingdom? We pick up the fascinating story from the time of Ahaz, who began ruling in Judah some 200 years after the two Israelite kingdoms went their separate ways.

King Ahaz's Clay Seal

"In the seventeenth year of Pekah the son of Remaliah, Ahaz the son of Jotham, king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God, as his father David had done" (2 Kings 16:1-2).

Ancient Near Eastern kings and other officials stamped their documents with special seals. As a result archaeologists have been able to identify the clay seals of two of the kings of Judah: Hezekiah and Ahaz. The two seals belonging to Hezekiah are not well preserved, but the one of King Ahaz of Judah is in beautiful condition. In 1996 archaeologists confirmed its authenticity. Just as people today use signatures to validate documents such as checks and contracts, in ancient times authorities stamped their official documents with seals that were typically carved from semiprecious stones. Sometimes the seals were placed on a ring, called a signet.

The most common material used for documents at that time was papyrus. "Papyrus documents were closed by rolling them and tying them with a string," explains Tsvi Scheider, assistant librarian at Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology. "A lump of wet clay was then placed on the knot and stamped with the seal ... After the clay dried, the papyrus was stored in an archive (see Jeremiah 32:10-14)" (Biblical Archaeology Review, July-August 1991, p. 27).

The resulting clay imprint, or bulla, bore the seal's impression. Although the papyrus, of organic matter, would eventually disintegrate, the clay bullae often survived. Since Israel lay at the intersection of three great empires—Egypt, Assyria and Babylon—it experienced frequent wars. Conquering armies often burned enemy cities to the ground. Almost everything would perish—except for some of the clay seals, which, when baked in such fires, turned hard as pottery.

Thousands of years later, as they have conducted excavations in such cities, archaeologists have sometimes discovered the remains of royal archives. Occasionally they even stumble onto a cache of clay seals that point to the origins and purpose of the original documents.

Robert Deutsch, writes about Ahaz's seal: "The king whose seal is impressed in this well-preserved piece of reddish-brown clay is King Ahaz of Judah, who ruled from 732 to 716 [B.C.] ... This lump of clay, called a bulla, was used to seal a papyrus document. We know this because the back of the bulla still bears the imprint of the texture of the papyrus ... On the left edge of the front of the bulla is a fingerprint that may well be that of King Ahaz himself! ...

"The seal contains not only the name of the king, but the name of his father, King Yehotam [Jotham]. In addition, Ahaz is specifically identified as 'king of Judah' ... The Hebrew inscription, which is set on three lines ..., translates, 'Belonging to Ahaz (son of) Yehotam, King of Judah' ... The Ahaz bulla has been examined by a number of preeminent scholars ... All agree that the bulla is genuine" (Biblical Archaeological Review, May-June 1998, pp. 54, 56).

Thus the existence of another biblical king is verified through archaeology.

Sennacherib Captures Lachish

Shortly after the fall of the northern Israelite kingdom, the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, descended on Judah. His assault came around 700 B.C., during the reign of Ahaz's successor, Hezekiah.

The Bible summarizes this invasion and Hezekiah's reaction. "And in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. Then Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king in Lachish, saying, 'I have done wrong; turn away from me; whatever you impose on me I will pay' " (2 Kings 18:13-14). However, even though Hezekiah promised to pay Sennacherib handsomely if he would spare Jerusalem, the Assyrian king decided to conquer the city.

We not only have the biblical account of this history, but also the Assyrian records—accounts that closely parallel the Bible version.

A century and a half ago archaeologist Henry Austen Layard discovered the ancient city of Nineveh and Sennacherib´s palace. There he found a graphic depiction of Sennacherib´s invasion of Judah carved in a series of stone panels adorning the palatial walls.

Moshe Pearlman describes the find: "The gems of Sennacherib's palace for biblical scholars were a series of thirteen slabs of wall reliefs depicting Sennacherib seated upon a throne on a hill-slope before a besieged city amidst the landscape of what was evidently meant to be the land of Judah. The reliefs (which may be seen in the British Museum) are clearly recognizable as a dramatic thirteen-part story in pictures of Sennacherib's campaign in this southern Israelite

kingdom ... In a panel facing the king is a cuneiform caption: 'Sennacherib, king of the Universe, king of Assyria, sat upon a throne and passed in review the booty taken from the city of Lachish' " (Digging Up the Bible, 1980, p. 96).

In effect, the biblical narrative is frozen in frames in Sennacherib's wall depicting the conquest of the city of Lachish. The Bible enlarges our view by adding an account of the letter sent at that time to Sennacherib from a desperate King Hezekiah. Judah's king pleaded for forgiveness and offered any payment to avoid Jerusalem's destruction.

A careful study of the panels depicting the taking of Lachish includes grisly details. "There sits the Assyrian monarch," writes Pearlman, "richly attired, observing his army attacking a fortified city which is stoutly defended. His battering rams are being pushed up towards the walls over ramps, and are covered by archers, sling-throwers and spearmen to keep the defenders at bay. In one panel prisoners are being impaled by Assyrian soldiers; in another they are being flayed. Moving out of the city under guard is a long procession of captives, and carts laden with booty" (p. 96).

In the 20th century, archaeologists have excavated Lachish and corroborated the precision of the biblical and the Assyrian accounts of the conquest. "The magnitude of Layard's discovery was given an added dimension some eighty years later when excavations unearthed the very stratum of ancient Lachish that was stormed by Sennacherib's forces. Arrow-heads and sling-shots used by the Assyrians in that battle were among the finds, and from the remains of the shattered city it was possible to reconstruct the plan of its defensive fortifications. They virtually matched those depicted in the reliefs on Sennacherib's palace walls. Thus, Lachish is a superb example of archaeological discovery joining ancient records in a word and picture to enrich the background of an episode in the Bible" (p. 97).

These exquisitely detailed contemporary finds from Assyria, along with the excavations of Lachish, dramatically corroborate each other and confirm the accuracy of the biblical account.

The Prism of Sennacherib

The archaeological evidence of the invasion does not end there. Another discovery sheds light on Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. In 1919 the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago purchased a 15-inch clay cylinder, called the Prism of Sennacherib or the Taylor Prism. The artifact testifies of eight of Sennacherib's military campaigns. Regarding the third, the narrator describes Sennacherib's invasion of Judah and the subsequent siege of Jerusalem.

The account reads: "As to [Judah's king] Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke. I laid siege to forty-six of his strong cities, walled forts and to countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered them by means of well-stamped earth-ramps, and battering-rams brought thus near to the walls, combined with attack by foot soldiers ... [Hezekiah] himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage" (James Pritchard, The Ancient Near East, Vol. 1, 1958, pp. 199-201).

Sennacherib boastfully begins his description of the siege. His language leads the reader to expect that the Assyrian monarch captured Jerusalem, just as he had taken 46 other strongholds during his campaign. But the account turns curiously quiet. Sennacherib ends the

account bragging about the tribute money paid by Hezekiah, a poor consolation prize. Sennacherib concludes: "Hezekiah himself, whom the terror-inspiring splendor of my lordship had overwhelmed, ... did send me, later, to Nineveh, my lordly city, together with talents of gold, ... talents of silver ... and all kinds of valuable treasures, his (own) daughters ... In order to deliver the tribute and to do obeisance as a slave he sent his messenger" (p. 201).

What really happened? Although the Assyrian records are awkwardly silent, the Bible completes the story: "And it came to pass on a certain night that the angel of the Lord went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were the corpses—all dead. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went away, returned home, and remained at Nineveh" (2 Kings 19:35-36).

"The one city he sought to subdue, but failed," says Pearlman, "was Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, where Hezekiah's spirit of resistance was much strengthened by the tough advice of the prophet Isaiah [see Isaiah 36-37]. Doubtless he would have wished the centerpiece of his wall decorations to have depicted the fall of Jerusalem. Instead, judging by the prominence given to Lachish, this must have been the scene of the fiercest fighting, and he evidently regarded its capture against stubborn defense as his most outstanding victory in this land"—instead of Jerusalem, which escaped (The Ancient Near East, p. 97).

The Assyrian report describes only the siege of Jerusalem. Something incredible must have occurred for the mighty Assyrians, who had conquered many powerful empires, to prevent the fall of Jerusalem.

A Possible Explanation

Sennacherib's defeat is not only recorded in the Bible; the Greek historian Herodotus gives an account of Sennacherib's humiliation in his History. He attributes the miraculous defeat to mice overrunning the camp and wreaking great havoc. "An army of field-mice swarmed over their opponents in the night ... [and] gnawed through their quivers and their bows, and the handles of their shields, so that on the following day they fled minus their arms and a great number fell" (Book 2:141).

The story about the mice might appear as fanciful myth. However, it might bear a kernel of truth. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, also mentions Sennacherib's defeat, explaining that it was caused by a plague. He cites an earlier historian who had written: "Now when Sennacherib was returning from his Egyptian war to Jerusalem, he found his army ... in danger [by a plague], for God had sent a pestilential distemper upon his army; and on the very first night of the siege, a hundred fourscore and five thousand, with their captains and generals, were destroyed" (Antiquities of the Jews, Book X, Chapter I, Section 5).

Some speculate the mice may have been carriers of the plague. If so, this would not be the only such historical example. Mice were responsible for carrying the black plague in the Middle Ages and just as easily could have transported this deadly malady into the Assyrian camp. The Bible states simply that the destruction came from God and does not mention specifics.

Even the biblical description of the death of Sennacherib is confirmed by discoveries in ancient Assyrian archives. "Now it came to pass, as he [Sennacherib] was worshiping in the temple of

Nisroch his god, that his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him down with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. Then Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place" (2 Kings 19:37).

The Assyrian account of Sennacherib's death is the same. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains: "According to Esarhaddon's records, his father Sennacherib had named him over his brothers as successor. 'To gain the kingship they slew Sennacherib their father,'" forcing Esarhaddon to hasten back from a military campaign to claim the throne (1988, Vol. 4, p. 396, "Sennacherib"). A parallel Babylonian account also mentions this assassination.

Thus we see confirmed even a tiny detail from the biblical account.

Hezekiah's Siloam Inscription

Another aspect of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem is well worth noting. Assyrian tactics called for surrounding the targeted city, shutting the inhabitants off from any outside source of food and water to starve them into submission before a final and decisive direct attack. While Sennacherib was busy plundering Judah's other cities, Hezekiah began a desperate building project to provide the city a secure water source before the Assyrians could lay siege to the capital.

"And when Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come, and that his purpose was to make war against Jerusalem, he consulted with his leaders and commanders to stop the water from the springs which were outside the city; and they helped him" (2 Chronicles 32:2-3). "... Hezekiah also stopped the water outlet of Upper Gihon, and brought the water by tunnel to the west side of the City of David" (verse 30).

Long after the Assyrian menace, this tunnel lay forgotten and undisturbed for centuries. Then, in 1880, two Arab boys were playing near the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem when one fell in. Swimming to the other side of the small body of water, he came under a rock overhang. There in the darkness he noticed a small passageway. After further investigation by the authorities, the biblical tunnel of Hezekiah's time was discovered anew. In the tunnel they even discovered an inscription in Hebrew made by the workers commemorating their amazing engineering feat during Hezekiah's time.

It reads: "And this is the account of the breakthrough. While the laborers were still working with their picks, each toward the other, and while there were still three cubits to be broken through, the voice of each was heard calling to the other, because there was a [split, crack or overlap] in the rock to the south and to the north. And at the moment of the breakthrough, the laborers struck each toward the other, pick against pick. Then the water flowed from the spring to the pool for 1,200 cubits. And the height of the rock above the heads of the laborers was 100 cubits" (Biblical Archaeology Review, July-August 1994, p. 37).

The "Siloam Inscription," as it came to be called, resides in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, taken there by Turkish authorities who ruled Jerusalem at the time. Israeli authorities claim it as a national monument and desire its return to Jerusalem.

The Bible vs. Fables

All these accounts lead us to several important conclusions.

• They call into question claims of critics that the Bible is merely a collection of myths, fables and other fiction. Extrabiblical records, like those from Assyria, consistently confirm the biblical accounts.

• These biblical narratives could not have been written centuries after the fact as many critics claim. The incidental details preserved in the Bible could have been known only by the people living during the events described.

• Finally, a spiritual guiding force must be inspiring the biblical accounts, for they always seem to match what independent sources describe. The truths are never obviously exaggerated or distorted as is the case in the historical records left by scribes and narrators with transparent national interests or personal agendas.

• The Bible narrative rings true. Unlike secular accounts, which exaggerate their heroes' accomplishments, the Bible stands as a believable report. It describes both the strengths and weaknesses of its leading characters. Its truths are not exaggerated or distorted as is the obvious case with records left by scribes and narrators with transparent national interests or personal agendas.

Even if archaeology is an imperfect science incapable of providing all the answers, it continues to independently verify the veracity of the biblical record.

In the next chapter, we will continue our examination of archaeology and the kingdom of Judah.

The Downfall of Judah: Exile to Babylon

We have been examining archaeological finds that confirm and clarify the historical record of the Bible. Several earlier chapter discussed the time of the divided kingdom of the Israelites after they split into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah after the death of King Solomon. Two chapters described the history of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the last chapter portrayed the early years of the southern kingdom of Judah. We continue with an examination of the last years of Judah as a kingdom.

Around 710 B.C. Judah found itself in a dangerous position. A decade before, Judah's fellow Israelites in the kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria. The Assyrians repopulated the land with others brought in from distant parts of the Assyrian Empire. Judah's territory had been largely devastated by Assyrian armies. Only a great miracle had saved the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the same fate that had overtaken their northern cousins.

Meanwhile, more winds of change were beginning to stir in the region. A new power, Babylon, was rising in the east. Could the tiny, weakened kingdom of Judah survive its precarious position between powerful and warring Assyria, Babylon and Egypt? The amazing story of Judah's survival is one of the themes of the Old Testament.

Hezekiah's Fateful Mistake

Soon after Jerusalem's miraculous deliverance from the Assyrians, Judah's King Hezekiah fell ill. After God healed Hezekiah, a Babylonian prince sent representatives with a message and gift of congratulations for the monarch. "At that time Berodach–Baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that Hezekiah had been sick" (2 Kings 20:12).

Hezekiah's response to what he naively interpreted as a neighborly act of kindness and reconciliation would prove costly in the end.

"And Hezekiah was attentive to them [the Babylonian ambassadors], and showed them all the house of his treasures–the silver and gold, the spices and precious ointment, and all his armory –all that was found among his treasures. There was nothing in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah, and said to him, 'What did these men say, and from where did they come to you?' So Hezekiah said, 'They came from a far country, from Babylon' ... Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord: "Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left"'" (verses 13–17).

Although Hezekiah proved righteous and faithful as king, he foolishly tried to impress his visitors by showing them the kingdom's wealth and weaponry. The Bible reveals that at this time God withdrew from Hezekiah "in order to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart" (2 Chronicles 32:31). God allowed Hezekiah to make this thoughtless decision. Thus the setting was established for the future Babylonian invasion of Judah and its rich capital, Jerusalem.

Manasseh: Vassal of the Assyrians

After Hezekiah's death his son Manasseh inherited the throne. It wasn't long before the young king departed from his father's righteous example and exposed himself as a wicked ruler. "Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty–five years in Jerusalem. But he did evil in the sight of the Lord ..." (2 Chronicles 33:1–2).

"So Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed ... And the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen. Therefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon" (verses 9–11).

Two Assyrian records corroborate Manasseh's submission to the Assyrians. "The name, 'Manasseh, king of Judah' appears on the Prism of Esarhaddon ... and on the Prism of Ashurbanipal" as among 22 rulers who paid tribute to Assyria (The New Bible Dictionary, 1996, p. 724).

The biblical narrative describing King Manasseh as being carried off "with hooks" (verse 11) refers to nose rings used to lead prisoners by ropes. It was a painful, humiliating and degrading punishment for those who would defy the mighty Assyrian kings.

Mighty Capital of a Mighty Empire

The Assyrian Empire, with Nineveh as its capital, appeared invincible at the time. James Muir graphically describes this empire at the time of the prophet Nahum (668 B.C):

"Assyria's expansion across western Asia could be likened to an octopus whose tentacles stretched from the Persian Gulf to the Nile, and whose head was Nineveh. At that time, Nineveh was considered one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Recently, three of its kings had adorned the city with the wealth of their conquests and had built fabulous palaces. These were made of brick, and on the walls of the palaces were exquisitely crafted bas–reliefs which depicted their great victories. The great walls which surrounded the city measured twelve miles in circumference" (Archaeology and the Scriptures, 1965, pp. 182–183).

In spite of Nineveh's greatness, Nahum foretold not only the city's destruction but predicted that it would never be rebuilt. "'Behold, I am against you,' says the Lord of hosts; 'I will lift your skirts over your face, I will show the nations your nakedness, and the kingdoms your shame. I will cast abominable filth upon you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle. It shall come to pass that all who look upon you will flee from you, and say, "Nineveh is laid waste! ..."'" (Nahum 3:5–7).

After its destruction, in 612 B.C, this mighty metropolis of the ancient world vanished from view. "Nineveh disappeared so quickly from sight," according to one author, "that when the Greek general Xenophon and his ten thousand soldiers passed over the site in his famous reconnaissance of the Persian Empire, he didn't realize the ruins of Nineveh were under his feet. What had happened? When Nineveh was put to the torch, everything was burnt, and

gradually what was left became an artificial mound covered with grass" (Arnold Brackman, The Luck of Nineveh, 1978, p. 21).

Although few would have believed it at the time, Nahum's remarkable prediction came to pass just as he had foretold. Nineveh was rediscovered only in 1845 by British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard. As a result, many treasures from its ruins adorn the galleries of great museums in several countries

A Scribe who Made an Impression

After Assyria fell, Babylon ascended to rule the region. With the rise of King Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 B.C), the days of the kingdom of Judah were numbered. Nevertheless, God sent faithful messengers to warn the nation's leaders to return to worship of the one true God before it was too late. Nehemiah said later, "Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands" (Nehemiah 9:30).

One of those prophets was Jeremiah, who lived while the Babylonians were threatening Jerusalem. His faithful scribe, Baruch, wrote down some of Jeremiah's prophecies. "Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah; and Baruch wrote on a scroll of a book, at the instruction of Jeremiah, all the words of the Lord which He had spoken to him" (Jeremiah 36:4). Archaeologists recently found a clay impression from Jeremiah's time bearing not only Baruch's name, but apparently even his fingerprint!

Tsvi Schneider, who in 1991 served as assistant librarian at Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology, writes about a seal with Baruch's name on it: "The first and best–known biblical name to be identified on a bulla [a lump of clay bearing a seal impression] is Baruch son of Neriah. Baruch was the scribe, loyal friend and political ally of the prophet Jeremiah. The inscription is in three lines and reads: 'Belonging to Berekhyahu/son of Neriyahu/the scribe.' The bulla refers to Baruch by his full given name ... Baruch son of Neriah, the seal impression tells us, was a scribe. Four episodes in the Book of Jeremiah mention Baruch, son of Neriah the scribe" (Biblical Archaeological Review, July–August 1991, p. 27).

The librarian explains that the names of three other people from Jeremiah's day, including Baruch's brother, appear in other clay impressions and seals. "It is interesting that chapter 36 of the Book of Jeremiah also contains the names of two other people whose seals have been impressed in surviving bullae: 'Yerahme'el son of the king' and 'Gemariah son of Shaphan.'"

The seal of Seriah, Baruch's brother, has been found as well. Seriah's name appears several times in Jeremiah 51 (verses 59–64). "The seal reads, in two lines, 'Belonging to Seriahu/Neriyahu' ... Seriah was the brother of Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe; both Seriah and Baruch were the sons of Neriah and grandsons of Mahseiah (Jeremiah 32:12, 51:59)" (Biblical Archaeological Review, p. 30).

These remarkable finds confirm even some of the tiniest details of the Bible– that four people mentioned in the book of Jeremiah were real people who lived in Jerusalem at the time.

The Fall of Jerusalem

The Bible's account of the conquest of Jerusalem is also confirmed by Babylonian records. First, let's notice the biblical record: "And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy. Therefore He brought against them the king of the Chaldeans [Babylonians] ..." (2 Chronicles 36:15–17).

"Then they burned the house of God [the temple], broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah ..." (2 Chronicles 36:19–21).

Jerusalem was actually conquered twice. The city was first captured but not destroyed. Later it fell a second time, in 587 B.C., when it was destroyed as the Bible describes. The city was put to the torch, its palaces and temple burned and its walls demolished. The Bible faithfully describes both defeats but does not specify when the city was conquered the first time.

In 1887 several Babylonian tablets, which archaeologists call The Babylon Chronicles, were deciphered. They provided dates of the reigns of many Babylonian kings. More tablets, deciphered in 1956, give the dates of Nebuchadnezzar's reign and activities. Regrettably, one tablet is missing that could account for the years 594–557 B.C. Other than this gap, the tablets document his reign.

The Archaeological Commentary on the Bible explains the significance of the 1956 find: "Until 1956, the date of the first conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was not known. But in that year, several cuneiform tablets were deciphered which gave an exact date for the first conquest – in 597 B.C." (1979, pp. 143–144).

Exile to Babylon

Like the Assyrians, the Babylonians deported vanquished peoples to maintain tighter control over conquered territories.

As their cousins in the northern kingdom of Israel fell into captivity by Assyria more than a century earlier, Judah's inhabitants now were taken to Babylon.

The situation seemed hopeless. Judah was devastated, and the Babylonians forcibly removed most of its citizens. Yet, in spite of their situation, God through His prophets encouraged the people not to give up hope that they would one day return to their homeland. He not only sent prophets to Judah but to Babylon as well. Men such as Daniel and Ezekiel, who both lived in Babylon, spoke of a coming restoration of Judah.

Speaking through Jeremiah, God held out hope for His people: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away

from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters ... that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace ... After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place" (Jeremiah 29:4–10).

After these encouraging words, the exiles flourished as a community in Babylon. They were so successful that after the 70 prophesied years of their exile the majority decided to stay. These circumstances nurtured the growth of two large Jewish enclaves in that part of the world, one in Babylon and the other in Jerusalem.

Archaeological evidence demonstrates the kind of favorable conditions that God promised Judah's inhabitants in Babylon. "In 1933, E.F. Weidner, the Assyriologist, took in hand to look through the tablets and sherds in the basement rooms of the Kaiser–Friedrich Museum ... Among this dull administrative rubbish Weidner suddenly found some priceless relics of red tape in the ancient world. On four different receipts for stores issued, among them best quality sesame oil, he came upon a familiar biblical name: 'Ja'–u–kinu'–Jehoiachin! There was no possibility of his name being mistaken, because Jehoiachin was given his full title: 'King of the [land of] Judah' ... Jehoiachin, the deposed king of Judah, lived with his family and his retinue in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. We may conclude from Weidner's discovery that the biblical account in the Second Book of Kings may be thus supplemented: 'And for his diet, there was a continual diet given him of the king of Babylon, every day a portion, until the day of his death, all the days of his life' (Jeremiah 52:34)" (Werner Keller, The Bible as History, 1980, pp. 303–304).

The Bank of Murashu & Sons

The enterprising inhabitants of Judah, who had come to Babylon as a defeated and captive people, were given considerable leeway by the equally industrious Babylonians. Historian Petra Eisele explains: "Although not much is known of the lives of the Jewish exiles in Babylon, enough is known to confirm their plight was not as harsh as their slavery had been in Egypt during Moses' time. In Babylon they did not live as prisoners or slaves, instead as a 'semi–free' people ... After the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. and granted the Jews the right to return to their native land, only a minority of these supposedly 'poor prisoners' took advantage of this generous offer. Many did not want to sacrifice the comforts and riches they had acquired in this 'foreign' land and face the uncertainties of going back to their 'homeland.'

"As the clay tablets of commercial documents in the fifth century B.C show, even after the end of the exile, the Babylonian banks were firmly in the hands of the Jews. There was one Jewish banker whose firm, Bank of Murashu & Sons, had greatly expanded into the real estate business. It had its headquarters in nearby Nippur, and had approximately 200 branches throughout the country!" (Babylon, quoted in Editorial EDAF, 1980, p. 70).

With thriving centers in Babylon and Jerusalem, the Jewish people were better equipped to survive the conquests of the Persians, Greeks and Romans. Several centuries later, in the New Testament period, they remained firmly established in Israel. Against all apparent odds, God's promise that Judah's inhabitants would not remain in their Babylonian captivity was fulfilled.

As we will also see in future chapters, archaeology has discovered much from this period to confirm the biblical record.

The Kingdom of Judah: Exile and Restoration

We have traced the history of the Old Testament from Genesis through the captivity of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. These chapters have shown that archaeological finds have confirmed and illuminated the biblical account. In this chapter we pick up the story with conditions and circumstances that allowed the descendants of the Kingdom of Judah to return to their homeland.

Although many of the survivors of the Babylonian invasion of Judah were exiled to Babylon for 70 years, they were not forsaken by God. In fact, some of the greatest Bible prophecies were made at that time, not just to give hope to those suffering captives but to comfort God's people throughout the ages. The apostle Paul reminds us of one of the reasons the biblical record is important: "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Daniel's Astounding Prophecies

When Judah was defeated by the Babylonians, Daniel was one of the young princes taken captive and educated in Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's court. The details of Babylonian customs and its governmental system described in the book of Daniel fit nicely with historical records and subsequent archaeological finds.

The New Bible Dictionary says about the book of Daniel: "The author gives evidence of having a more accurate knowledge of Neo-Babylonian and early Persian history than any known historian since the 6th century BC . . . He knew enough of 6th century customs to represent Nebuchadnezzar as being able to make and alter the laws of Babylon with absolute sovereignty (Daniel 2:13-13, 46), while depicting Darius the Mede as being helpless to change the laws of the Medes and Persians (Daniel 6:8-9). Also, he accurately represented the change from punishment by fire under the Babylonians (Daniel 3) to punishment by the lions' den under the Persians (Daniel 6), since fire was sacred to them" (1982, p. 263, "Daniel, Book of").

During the period Daniel served in Nebuchadnezzar's court, he received a series of prophecies from God. These remarkable predictions described the final years of the Old Testament era, the Intertestamental period, the days of the New Testament and up to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

God revealed to Daniel that four kingdoms would rule a great part of the world from Daniel's time to the coming of God's Kingdom. Although parts of these prophecies, in Daniel 2-12, are in mostly symbolic language, God does reveal the identity of the four kingdoms.

The first was Babylon, the dominant kingdom of Daniel's time (Daniel 2:37-38). Afterwards would come the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians (Daniel 8:20) followed by the Greek Empire (verse 21). Finally the Roman Empire would arise and defeat the Greeks and absorb parts of the previous empires (Daniel 2:40; 7:7, 23).

Although this final empire would experience periodic declines through the centuries, it would not

permanently disappear. Rather, at successive intervals it would revive in the form of several incarnations of the "Holy Roman Empire." God revealed to Daniel that the last revival would be guided by a world dictator and a religious leader who would govern with 10 rulers under them. They would rule until the establishment of the Kingdom of God at Christ's return (Daniel 2:41-44; 8:23-26).

Prophecy of Babylon's Downfall

When Daniel received this prophecy, Babylon's power was at its peak. Nebuchadnezzar could boast of his massive building projects that had enlarged and beautified Babylon. "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?" he proudly and rhetorically asked (Daniel 4:30). The existence of Nebuchadnezzar's massive building projects are confirmed by archaeology.

Excavators at the beginning of this century unearthed some of the remains of this vast city. A historian summarizes the finds: "In 1899 the German Oriental Society equipped a large expedition under the direction of Professor Robert Koldewey, the architect, to examine the famous ruined mound of 'Babil' on the Euphrates. The excavations, as it turned out, took longer than anywhere else. In eighteen years the most famous metropolis of the ancient world, the royal seat of Nebuchadnezzar, was brought to light, and at the same time, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the 'Hanging Gardens,' loudly extolled by Greek travellers of a later day, and 'E-temen-an-ki,' the legendary Tower of Babel. In the palace of Nebuchadnezzar and on the Ishtar Gate, which was situated beside it, countless inscriptions were discovered" (Werner Keller, The Bible as History, 1980, p. 302).

Regarding Nebuchadnezzar, the same author mentions: "Hardly any other monarch in the past was such an assiduous builder. There is scarcely any mention of warlike activities, conquests and campaigns. In the forefront there is the constant building activity of Nebuchadnezzar. Hundreds of thousands of bricks bear his name, and the plans of many of the buildings have been preserved. Babylon in fact surpassed all the cities of the ancient orient: it was greater than Thebes, Memphis and Ur, greater even than Nineveh" (Keller, p. 316).

It seemed impossible for this great city to be suddenly conquered. Yet Daniel predicted its demise the same night it fell to the Persians. He interpreted the mysterious handwriting on the wall of the palace and told the king: " 'Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians' . . . [and] that very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom . . ." (Daniel 5:28-31).

About 100 years later the Greek historian Herodotus (484-420 B.C.) confirmed Daniel's account of the fall of Babylon: "The Persians, drawing off the river [Euphrates] by a canal into the lake, which was till now a marsh, he [Cyrus] made the stream to sink till its former channel could be forded. When this happened, the Persians who were posted with this intent made their way into Babylon by the channel of the Euphrates, which had now sunk to about the height of the middle of a man's thigh . . . The Persians thus entered the city . . . and the inhabitants who lived in the central part of Babylon were unaware of the enemies' presence due to the great size of the city and since they were celebrating a festival. They continued dancing and exchanging gifts until they were suddenly told of their sad fate. In this manner was Babylon conquered" (History, book 1, paragraphs 191-192).

Cyrus' Acts Foretold

True to Bible prophecy, these events occurred when the 70 years of exile expired. Cyrus the Persian, allied with the Medes, conquered the Babylonian Empire and freed the descendants of the kingdom of Judah who had been taken into captivity. Several prophets foretold the fall of Babylon. Isaiah even mentioned Cyrus by name years before he rose to defeat the Babylonians.

Some 200 years before Cyrus was born, God said through Isaiah: "I am the Lord . . . who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be built,' and to the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.' " (Isaiah 44:24-28).

"Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—to subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut . . . I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the Lord, who call you by your name, am the God of Israel" (Isaiah 44:24-28, 45:1-4).

In a day when conquerors were ruthless with their captives, Cyrus is known in history as a considerate ruler who offered relative freedom to the peoples previously conquered by the Babylonians.

About a century ago, a clay cylinder inscribed with a decree from King Cyrus was found in the ruins of Babylon. Called the Cyrus Cylinder, it is on display in the British Museum. Its language is similar to the decree given by Cyrus in the Bible. The main difference is Cyrus's use of Babylonian wording for God. He declares that he was liberating the peoples because a particular "God" had pronounced his name and chosen him in a miraculous way.

Writing from a Babylonian perspective, Cyrus said: "Marduk [the Babylonian name for the chief god] scanned and looked through all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him. He pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, and declared him to be the ruler of the world . . . and ordered him to march against his city Babylon . . . Without any battle, he made him enter his town Babylon, sparing Babylon and calamity . . . I gathered all their inhabitants and returned them to their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled . . . all the gods . . . in their former chapels" J. B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 1969, p. 316).

Return from Exile

The biblical version of the decree, recorded in Ezra 1, reveals the prophecy's fulfillment: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. and He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah" (Ezra 1:1-2).

"Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in

Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem" (verses 3-4).

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, records the reactions of the Jews when Cyrus entered Babylon:

"This [prophecy] was known to Cyrus by his reading the book which Isaiah left behind him of his prophecies; for this prophet said that God had spoken thus to him in a secret vision: 'My will is, that Cyrus, whom I have appointed to be king over many and great nations, send back my people to their own land, and build my temple.'

"This was foretold by Isaiah one hundred and forty years before the temple was demolished. Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfil what was so written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God . . ." (Antiquities of the Jews, Book XI, Chapter I, Section 2).

Thus the history of the descendants of the kingdom of Judah, the Jews, continued to be recorded in what would become the Bible. However, their brethren of the other Israelitish tribes, taken into captivity earlier by the Assyrians, had by now largely lost their identity in the former Assyrian Empire, just as foretold in prophecy (1 Kings 17).

Persian Period: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

The Old Testament period ends during the era of Persian rule. Several Bible books accurately describe the Persian customs of the time. While the books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate the return of the Jews to the land of Judah, the book of Esther recounts the story of a young Jewish girl named Esther who became the queen of King Xerxes I.

Nehemiah's story begins with his service to the Persian king. "And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king . . ." (Nehemiah 2:1). While the title of cupbearer doesn't sound important today, it was one of the highest government posts of that time.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains: "[The cupbearer was] an officer of high rank at ancient oriental courts, whose duty it was to serve the wine at the king's table. On account of the constant fear of plots and intrigues, a person must be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold this position . . . His confidential relations with the king often endeared him to his sovereign and also gave him a position of great influence" (1979, Vol. I, p. 837, "Cupbearer").

Archaeologists have discovered a list of salaries paid to the highest Assyrian officials. This record reflects the general values of similar posts in the Persian administration. After the commanding general, the prime minister and the palace authority came the cupbearer, who earned the fourth-largest salary in the kingdom.

Nehemiah had enough wealth accumulated when he arrived as Jerusalem´s new governor that

he had no need to tax the suffering populace. Indeed he apparently took it on himself to personally provide for a large number of his Jewish countrymen. "And at my table," he writes, "were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people" (Nehemiah 5:17-18).

Queen Esther Saves the Jews

Even though thousands of Jews successfully resettled the territory of the former kingdom of Judah, many remained dispersed throughout the chief cities of the Persian Empire. The book of Esther gives us a glimpse of the influence the Jewish community had in the empire between 500 and 450 B.C., as well as the problems that influence sometimes engendered.

One of the Persian officials, Haman, complained to the king about the Jews: "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain" (Esther 3:8). "And the king said to Haman, 'The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you" (verse 11).

As the book that honors her name recounts, thanks to Queen Esther's courage and faith, God miraculously intervened and caused her people to be spared. The book of Esther was obviously written by someone familiar with the procedures and customs of the Persian court of the mid-fifth century B.C.

Much archaeological evidence of this Jewish influence has been found throughout the territory of the Persian Empire. Assyriologist Georges Conteau writes:

"Hundreds of clay tablets have been found dating back to the beginning of the Persian period which deal with a prosperous Jewish enterprise, Murashu and Sons. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC, he deported some of the noble families to Babylon, and the Murashu family was among them.

"The family of exiles prospered in the city of Nippur and reached its maximum influence and wealth under the Persian rule of Artaxerxes I (564-424 BC) and Darius II (423-405 BC). Many of the documents of the firm are written in both cuneiform and Aramaic characters so they can be more easily understood by a wider audience. Most deal with contracts, payments or rentals" (Daily Life in Babylon and Assyria, 1958, p. 95).

We have already seen in this article that the Persian customs and history of the account of Esther also ring true. Speaking of Esther, The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible notes: "The author employs the customary formula for the beginning of an historical account . . . [and] his references to Persian customs show considerable accurate knowledge . . . More recently cuneiform evidence has been found to show that there was a Persian official named Marduka (Mordecai) in Susa [Shushan] at the end of the reign of Darius I or the beginning of the reign of Xerxes" (1962, Vol. II, p. 151, "Esther, Book of").

In the book of Esther, Mordecai is Esther's uncle and is a high government official who is

ultimately named as prime minister to the king.

We will continue the story with a fascinating era: the Intertestamental period, the time between the testaments, when the events described in the books of the Old Testament history were completed but before the events that introduced the four Gospels.

The Intertestamental Period: Daniel's Prophecies Come to Pass

The previous chapters have traced the history of the Old Testament from Genesis through the captivity of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, describing archaeological finds and historical accounts that have confirmed and illuminated the biblical account. In this chapter we show more evidence that confirms the accuracy of the Bible accounts by picking up the story with the Intertestamental period: the time between the testaments, when the events described in the books of the Old Testament were completed but before the events that introduced the four Gospels.

During this 420 years several crucial prophecies were fulfilled, dramatizing the authenticity of God's Word and setting the stage for another prophesied event: the appearance of the Messiah.

The Old Testament comes to a close shortly after the events in the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. However, Daniel's prophecies continue to forecast events within the Intertestamental period.

Alexander the Great in Prophecy

In a vision, God revealed to Daniel that the kingdom to rise after the Persians would be the Greeks under Alexander the Great. Gabriel, the angelic messenger from God, explained to Daniel: "The ram which you saw, having the two horns-they are the kings of Media and Persia. And the male goat is the kingdom of Greece. The large horn that is between its eyes is the first king. As for the broken horn and the four that stood up in its place, four kingdoms shall arise out of that nation, but not with its power" (Daniel 8:20-21).

The Persian kingdom rapidly came to an end in 333 B.C. when Alexander the Great defeated the armies of Darius III at Issus. Yet, 10 years later, true to the prophecy in Daniel 8, Alexander unexpectedly died and the Greek Empire divided into four parts, each headed by one of his four generals.

God's people were miraculously saved and liberated when, according to Josephus, Cyrus saw his name and feats prophesied in the Bible. The writings of Josephus also include an account of Alexander the Great sparing Jerusalem from destruction after he saw his exploits prophesied in Scripture.

When Alexander descended on the Middle East, it was natural that almost everyone resisted him. Those who did were mercilessly trampled before him. Neighboring Phoenicia felt Alexander's wrath when he utterly destroyed Tyre. It seemed the same fate awaited rebellious Jerusalem, which had backed the hapless Persians crushed by Alexander at Issus.

Surprising Showdown at Jerusalem

Josephus recounts how Alexander's troops surrounded the city and readied themselves to attack. Suddenly the city gates swung open, and out came the high priest with his entourage.

Josephus writes: "... For Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest ... whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind. However, Parmenio alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass that, when all others adored him, he should adore the high priest of the Jews?

"To whom he replied, 'I did not adore him, but that God who hath honoured him with his high priesthood; for I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit [clothing], when I was at Dios in Macedonia, who ... exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians; whence ... now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision ... I believe that I bring this army under the divine conduct ...'

"... And when the book of Daniel was shewed him, wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended; and as he was then glad, he ... bade them ask what favours they pleased of him; whereupon the high priest desired that they ... might pay no tribute on the seventh year. He granted all they desired ..." (Antiquities of the Jews, XI, viii, 5).

Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the Abomination of Desolation

Thus began the Greek reign over Judea, which would last 150 years. In chapter 11, Daniel prophesied the changes in fortune the Jews would know under the Greeks. After Alexander died Judea became part of the realm of General Ptolemy, who governed from Egypt. By and large the period was peaceful for the Jews.

However, the intermittent wars between the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria for complete control of the Greek Empire came to a head in 198 B.C. In that year the Ptolemies saw defeat. Judea then came under the dominion of the Seleucids.

Shortly after the Seleucid line of the Greek Empire began governing Judea, a king arose who was to fulfill several dire prophecies recorded in Daniel. According to historians, Antiochus IV Epiphanes was the ruler who set up the first "abomination of desolation" mentioned in Daniel 8 and 11.

Daniel 8:8-13 describes this time: "Therefore the male goat [the Greek Empire] grew very great; but when he became strong, the large horn was broken [Alexander the Great suddenly died at the apex of his power], and in place of it four notable ones came up toward the four winds of heaven [Alexander's kingdom was divided among his four top generals]" (verse 8).

"And out of one of them came a little horn [Antiochus IV Epiphanes] which grew exceedingly

great toward the south [Egypt], toward the east [Mesopotamia], and toward the Glorious Land [Judea] ... He even exalted himself as high as the Prince of the host; and by him the daily sacrifices were taken away, and the place of His sanctuary [the temple at Jerusalem] was cast down ... Then I heard a holy one speaking ... 'How long will the vision be, concerning the daily sacrifices and the transgression of desolation ...?'" (verses 9-13).

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says of Antiochus Epiphanes: "His career with respect to Palestine is recorded in 1 and 2 Maccabees, and remarkably predicted in [Daniel] 11:21-35" (Vol. I, p. 145, "Antiochus IV Epiphanes"). The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees are not included in the traditional Hebrew canon of Scripture but are valuable as historical accounts. Both books were written before the birth of Christ.

Antiochus's Cruel Reign

A brief history of the three years of the "abomination of desolation" under Antiochus Epiphanes is to be found in The Bible Knowledge Commentary:

"This part of the vision anticipated the rise of a ruler in the Greek Empire who subjugated the people and land of Israel, desecrated her temple, interrupted her worship, and demanded for himself the authority and worship that belongs to God. He desecrated the temple and abolished the daily sacrifice.

"Antiochus sent his general Apollonius with 22,000 soldiers into Jerusalem on what was purported to be a peace mission. But they attacked Jerusalem on the Sabbath, killed many people, took many women and children as slaves, and plundered and burned the city. In seeking to exterminate Judaism and to Hellenize the Jews, he forbade the Jews to follow their religious practices (including their festivals and circumcision), and commanded that copies of the Law be burned. Then he set up the abomination that causes desolation.

"In this culminating act he erected on December 16, 167 BC an altar to Zeus on the altar of burnt offering outside the temple, and had a pig offered on the altar. The Jews were compelled to offer a pig on the 25th of each month to celebrate Antiochus Epiphanes' birthday. Antiochus promised apostate Jews great reward if they would set aside the God of Israel and worship Zeus, the god of Greece. Many in Israel were persuaded by his promises and worshiped the false god. However, a small remnant remained faithful to God, refusing to engage in those abominable practices. Antiochus IV died insane in Persia in 163 BC" (Logos Library System, 1997).

The precision of Daniel's description of events of this period (given more than 300 years earlier) have led many Bible critics to redate the book of Daniel to after these events took place. They would not admit that the events had been prophesied. However, thanks to the discovery in 1948 of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which include parts of every Old Testament book except Esther, the traditional date of Daniel has gained additional support.

Explains Gleason Archer, professor of Old Testament and Semitic studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School: "In order to avoid the impact of the decisive evidence of supernatural inspiration with which Daniel so notably abounds, it was necessary for rationalistic scholarship to find some later period in Jewish history when all the 'predictions' had already been fulfilled, such as the

reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BC) ... With the wealth of new data from the manuscripts of the Dead Sea caves, it is possible to settle this question once and for all" (Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, 1982, p. 282).

Thanks to this new linguistic evidence, Dr. Archer proceeds to show the accuracy of the traditional dating of Daniel (around 530 B.C.).

Jews lose their independence to Rome

In 164 B.C., with the heroic leadership of the Maccabean family, the Jews overthrew their Syrian oppressors. For a century they enjoyed their Jewish independence under the rule of the Maccabean descendants. However, in 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey conquered Judea, making it Roman territory.

Several decades later the Jews would suffer greatly when the Romans chose Herod the Great as king of Judea. He reigned from 37 to 4 B.C. His last years bring the Intertestamental period to a close and usher in the New Testament era.

In the upcoming chapters, we will continue to examine how archaeological evidence confirms the authenticity of God's Word.

and .

Jesus Christ: The Early Years

The previous chapters have traced some of the many historical and archaeological findings that confirm and clarify the biblical record of the Old Testament, a record that spans some 4,000 years. We continue that survey into the New Testament era.

How much has archaeology confirmed about the New Testament period? Are the many names mentioned in the New Testament real people? Can their existence be verified by credible historical evidence other than the Bible?

Although the time in question is much briefer—less than a century—archaeology has much to tell us about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and His apostles. As we examine this period, the physical evidence supporting the biblical record multiplies. Let's begin this fascinating archaeological journey into the New Testament world.

Appropriately, the Old Testament ends with God's promise to send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. In Malachi, apparently the last prophetic book of the Old Testament to be written, the final two chapters record a dramatic prophecy: " 'Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,' says the Lord of Hosts" (Malachi 3:1).

It should come as no surprise that the story flow of the New Testament begins where the last of the Old Testament prophets leaves off—with the arrival of the messenger foretold by Malachi. This shows a continuation from the Old to the New Testament, bearing in mind that a few hundred years had passed in the interim.

At the beginning of Luke's gospel, an angel tells Zacharias the priest about the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi. The messenger prophesied by God in the Old Testament would be his son John (the Baptist), who would prepare the way for the Christ. The angel told him: "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John .... He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:13, 17).

Thus, at the start of Luke's gospel, the stage is set for the first coming of the Messiah.

Herod the Mighty King

One of the first people to appear in the New Testament account is King Herod. Matthew takes us to the court of Herod the Great: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him ....

"Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also" (Matthew 2:1-3, 7-8).

Was Herod a real figure, and was he the king at this time? Yes. Secular history and archaeology have confirmed his existence and reign beyond a doubt. He is known in history as Herod the Great. Under the Romans this non-Israelite king had ruled the province of Judea (most of the area of the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah) for almost 40 years when Jesus Christ appeared on the scene. Herod was a great builder and left his name on many monuments. He was a famous figure in Jewish and Roman history.

John McRay, archaeologist and Wheaton College professor of New Testament, summarizes Herod's reign: "Archaeological excavations have uncovered a surprisingly large amount of evidence pertaining to Herod the Great .... Herod the Great was an Idumean who, in 41 B.C., was granted provisional rule of Galilee by Mark Antony [the friend of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra´s last lover] .... In 30 B.C. Octavian (Caesar Augustus) affirmed Herod's rule over Judea, Samaria, and Galilee .... Herod remained in power until his death in 4 B.C.; thus Christ was born in Bethlehem prior to that date" (Archaeology and the New Testament, 1997, p. 91).

One of the main reasons Herod is referred to as Herod the Great has to do with his extensive and exquisite building projects. F.F. Bruce, former professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester in England, says, "Had Herod done nothing else, he would have made a secure niche in history for himself as a great builder" (New Testament History, 1972, p. 20).

He is known to have initiated construction projects in at least 20 cities or towns in Israel and more than 10 in foreign cities. Two inscriptions pertaining to Herod have been found in Athens. One reads: "The people [erect this monument to] King Herod, lover of the Romans, because of his beneficence and good will [shown] by him." The other said: "The people [erect this monument to] King Herod, devout and lover of Caesar, because of his virtue and beneficence" (ibid, p. 92).

Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, confirms Herod's great construction projects outside Israel: "And when he had built so much, he shewed the greatness of his soul to no small number of foreign cities .... And are not the Athenians .... full of donations that Herod presented them withal!" (Wars of the Jews, Book I, Chapter XXI, Section 11).

Of his notable building achievements inside Israel, six are generally acclaimed as the most notable: (1) his renovation of the temple and expansion of the temple platform in Jerusalem; (2) Herodium, his palace-fortress near Bethlehem, encased in a manmade mountain; (3) his magnificent palace at Jericho, equipped with a swimming pool more than 100 feet long; (4) Masada, a mountain fortress where he built two palaces (the site was later immortalized as the last holdout of the Jews in defense of their country against the Romans); (5) Caesarea, a manmade port city built under his supervision that became the official headquarters of the Romans; and (6) Samaria, the capital of the former kingdom of Israel, which he rebuilt and renamed Sebaste.

Of the six, all except Herodium and Masada are mentioned in Scripture.

From studying the remains of Herod's vast building programs, archaeologists and architects have nothing but praise for the beauty, massiveness, ingenuity and practicality of his projects. For instance, at the base of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem archaeologists discovered, among other massive foundation stones, one block that weighed 415 tons. In comparison, the largest blocks in the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt weigh only 15 tons, and the megaliths in Stonehenge, England, weigh only up to 40 tons.

Herod the Cruel King

Herod was known not just for his great building, political and military skills but for his great cruelty. The Bible gives us an indication of his utter disregard for human life in its record of his reaction to hearing of the birth of Jesus.

Having heard that a "King of the Jews" had been born, Herod was greatly disturbed by this potential threat to his power and throne (Matthew 2:1-3). When his scheme to identify the newborn Messiah failed (verses 7-8, 12), Herod lashed out violently.

"Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under [the approximate age of Jesus], according to the time which he had determined from the wise men" (verse 16).

The massacre in Bethlehem was not out of character for Herod. A.T. Robertson, chairman of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, shows us Herod's savagery. Dr. Robertson describes Herod's cruelty even toward those in his own family:

"Those familiar with the story of Herod the Great in Josephus can well understand the meaning of these words. Herod in his rage over his family rivalries and jealousies put to death the two sons of Mariamne [his wife] (Aristobulus and Alexander), Mariamne herself, and Antipater, another son and once his heir, besides the brother and mother of Mariamne (Aristobulus, Alexandra) and her grandfather John Hyrcanus. He had made will after will and was now in a fatal illness and fury over the question of the Magi. He showed his excitement and the whole city was upset because the people knew only too well what he could do when in a rage over the disturbance of his plans" (Word Pictures in the New Testament, Bible Explorer Software, 1997).

The New Testament description of Herod the Great is thus confirmed by what historians and archaeologists have found concerning his rulership, building projects, political strength and uncontrollable wrath toward anyone threatening his kingship.

Caesar Augustus's Census

Luke, the meticulous historian, introduces other famous personages in his account of the birth of Christ. "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city" (Luke 2:1-3).

Caesar Augustus, or Octavian, was Julius Caesar's adopted son. He ruled the Roman Empire

for 57 years (43 B.C. to A.D. 14) and established an era of peace and stability that would facilitate the growth of Christianity.

Archaeologists have made great progress in discovering how and when a Roman census was taken. Ancient papyrus census decrees have been found for the years 20, 34, 48, 62 and 104. These show they normally took place every 14 years, although local counts at times were taken more frequently.

A papyrus in the British Museum describes a census similar to Luke's account, taken in 104, in which people were ordered to return to their birthplaces. It reads: "Gaius Vibius Mazimus, Prefect of Egypt: Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing out of their provinces to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census and may also attend diligently to the cultivation of their allotments" (Frederick G. Kenyon, Greek Papyri in the British Museum, 1907, plate 30).

For many years some scholars had doubted the Bible's accuracy since they thought Luke had erroneously referred to another Quirinius who ruled a decade after Christ's birth. But now the biblical account has been confirmed by further evidence.

Researcher Randall Price writes: "Some recent archaeological evidence has provided new insights into the time and place of the birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke gives the time of birth with a specific reference to a census decreed by Quirinius, the governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). While inscriptional evidence reveals that there was more than one ruler with this name, a Quirinius within the time frame of Jesus' birth has been found on a coin placing him as proconsul of Syria and Cilicia from 11 B.C. until after 4 B.C." (The Stones Cry Out, 1997, p. 299).

Joseph's Occupation in Nazareth

Once Herod died, Joseph and Mary brought Jesus back to Israel and returned to their home in Nazareth. Joseph was a skilled craftsman who worked not only with wood but with stone masonry. The usual term translated as "carpenter" in the Bible is misleading. The Greek term is tekton, which has a broader meaning.

"The Greek word tekton, translated 'carpenter' in Mark 6:3, has the root meaning of 'artisan,' that is, a skilled worker who works on some hard material such as wood or stone or even horn or ivory .... In Jesus' day construction workers were not as highly specialized as in today's work force. For example, the tasks performed by carpenters and masons could easily overlap" (Richard A. Batey, Jesus & the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus, p. 76).

Jesus learned the trade from Joseph and lived in the area of Nazareth most of His life. Although Nazareth was a small Galilean village of no more than a few hundred inhabitants, Joseph and Jesus likely found steady work in the city of Sepphoris four miles away.

About the time of Jesus' birth, Herod Antipas—son of Herod the Great and ruler over Galilee who would later order the execution of John the Baptist—chose Sepphoris as his capital.

"For more than three decades while Jesus grows up in Nearby Nazareth a huge construction project continues, as Sepphoris rapidly becomes the largest and most influential city in the region ....

"Joseph and Jesus knew of the construction of the new capital and would have been acquainted with artisans and other workers employed on the site. Shirley Jackson Case, professor of New Testament at the University of Chicago, [wrote:] '.... It requires no very daring flight of the imagination to picture the youthful Jesus seeking and finding employment in the neighboring city of Sepphoris. But whether or not he actually labored there, his presence in the city on various occasions can scarcely be doubted; and the fact of such contacts during the formative years of his young manhood may account for attitudes and opinions that show themselves conspicuously during his public ministry'" (Batey, pp. 70-71).

Recent archaeological excavations in Sepphoris show it to have been a bustling, prosperous city during the years Jesus grew up in nearby Nazareth. This historical record helps us better understand the background of Christ's teachings, which included illustrations drawn not just from farming and animal husbandry, but also construction, rulers and nobility, the theater, government, finance and other aspects of city life.

In the next chapter, we will continue with important background information that helps us better understand the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus Christ's Early Ministry

In the last chapter, we examined historical and archaeological evidence that helps us better understand the time in Judea when Jesus Christ was born and grew up in the household of Joseph and Mary. We continue with the beginning of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

After briefly discussing Jesus' childhood, the Gospels go right into His ministry. According to Luke, "Jesus . . . began His ministry at about thirty years of age . . ." (Luke 3:23).

Archaeologists generally date the start of Christ's ministry to the year A.D. 27. "The beginning of Jesus' public ministry," writes archaeology professor John McRay, "is dated by synchronisms [chronological arrangements of events and people] in the Gospel of Luke (3:1-2). A date of A.D. 27 seems likely . . . The dates mentioned by Luke are rather well established . . ." (Archaeology and the New Testament, 1997, p. 160).

Nazareth, Jesus' hometown

At first Jesus Christ's ministry centered on the hill country of Galilee and Nazareth, His hometown. "So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read" (Luke 4:16).

During the last century archaeological excavations have confirmed the New Testament description of Nazareth as a small, insignificant village. The Gospels record that one of the disciples, Nathanael of nearby Cana, quipped, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). So far archaeologists have found it to have been an agricultural village with wine and olive presses, caves for storing grains and cisterns for water and wine.

However, Jesus' ministry in Nazareth was short-lived. When Jesus entered the synagogue and revealed He was the Messiah, the townspeople rejected His message and tried to kill Him. "So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way. Then He went down to Capernaum . . ." (Luke 4:28-31).

The Bible reveals that members of Jesus' own family did not believe in Him and were embarrassed when He cast out demons. At one point they thought He had lost His mind. "Then the multitude came together again [seeking healing], so that they could not so much as eat bread. But when His own people heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, 'He is out of His mind' . . . Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.' But He answered them, saying, 'Who is My mother, or My brothers?' And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother" (Mark 3:20-21, 31-35).

Jesus ended His ministry in Nazareth with the words, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is

accepted in his own country" (Luke 4:24).

Relocation to Capernaum

Having been rejected in His hometown of Nazareth, Christ moved to Capernaum, one of the towns around the harp-shaped Sea of Galilee. This region had a large population sustained by a thriving agricultural and fishing industry.

"Their soil," wrote the Jewish historian Josephus, "is universally rich and fruitful, and full of the plantations of trees of all sorts, insomuch that it invites, by its fruitfulness, the most slothful to take pains in its cultivation. Accordingly it is all cultivated by its inhabitants, and no part lies idle" (Wars of the Jews, Book III, Chapter III, Section 2). Jesus drew many of His parables and illustrations from daily life and activities around the lake.

The site of Capernaum, which means "village of Nahum," was identified in 1838 and was extensively excavated during this century. What have archaeologists found?

John Laughlin, professor of religion at Averett College,Danville, VA., participated in excavations at Capernaum. He comments: "What is known indicates that at this time Capernaum was a small village located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with a population of probably no more than 1,000 people. The few architectural remains indicate the buildings were spacious and well constructed of dressed stones and large amounts of plaster. This suggests that the village flourished economically during Jesus' time. Its location on the crossroads of important trade routes, the fertile lands surrounding it and the rich fishing available all contributed to its economic development" (Biblical Archaeological Review, September-October 1993, p. 59).

The synagogue at Capernaum

"Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths . . . Now He arose from the synagogue and . . . when the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them" (Luke 4:31, 38, 40).

Archaeologists have found at Capernaum the remains of a beautiful limestone synagogue dated to the fourth or fifth century. Yet what caused more excitement was the discovery in the 1960s that beneath this building was the foundation of an earlier synagogue built of basalt, which is common to that area, that apparently dates toChrist's time.

The Gospels even include the detail of who built the synagogue in Capernaum. "Now when [Jesus] concluded all His sayings in the hearing of the people, He entered Capernaum. And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, 'for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue' " (Luke 7:1-5, emphasis added throughout).

It was a tradition among the Jews to build a new synagogue on the foundation of the older one.

"Pottery found in and under this basalt floor," explains archaeologist Hershel Shanks, "clearly dates the basalt structure to the first century A.D. or earlier. Since the site of a synagogue rarely changed in antiquity, this basalt building, which closely follows the plan of the later limestone synagogue, must also be a synagogue, and very likely the one in which Jesus preached" (Biblical Archaeological Review, November-December 1983, p. 27).

Peter's house discovered?

Between this synagogue and the nearby lake, excavators discovered what many believe to be the remains of the house of the apostle Peter. Along with his brother Andrew, Peter made his living as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:18). Matthew records that Peter had a house in Capernaum in which Jesus healed his mother-in-law (Matthew 8:5, 14-15).

In 1968 the excavators of the synagogue investigated the remains of a nearby octagonal structure with mosaic floors. During the Byzantine period such structures ofen were constructed over what were thought to be significant religious sites.

Archaeologists dated the structure to the fifth century. Beneath it they found an earlier church that they dated to the fourth century based on writings and inscriptions on the walls. The central hall of this church "was part of an earlier house built, according to the excavators, in the mid-first century A.D." (McRay, p. 164).

"The first century house was built around two courtyards with the outside entrance opening directly into one of the courtyards. A taboun (round oven) was found in this courtyard, which indicates it was used as the main family room. The southern courtyard may have been used for animals or as a working area. In either size or building material, the house is not unlike all the other houses found in Capernaum" (McRay, pp. 164-165).

In other ways, however, the house was distinctly different. At some point early in its history the house's large center room had been plastered, making it the only house in Capernaum yet discovered to have plastered walls. The walls and floor were later replastered twice.

"During the mid-first century the pottery used in the room ceased to be of the typical domestic variety. Only storage jars and oil lamps were found after this point. Thus the use of the room must have changed from normal residential living. More than one hundred fifty inscriptions were scratched on its walls in Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin from this time until the fourth century . . .

"Sometime after the first century two pillars were erected to raise the roof of the large central room, creating an impressively high ceiling. The fifth-century octagonal chapel was built with the center of its concentric walls directly over this room. Evidence now available suggests that this chapel was built over a first-century house which was set apart in the middle of that century as a public area. It was made into a church and at some point came to be venerated as the house of Peter. It would not be prudent to apply the data beyond that" (McRay, pp. 165-166).

Around the Sea of Galilee

The Gospels record even such detail as meteorological conditions around the Sea of Galilee. "Now when they had left the multitude, [the disciples] took [Jesus] along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling" (Mark 4:36-37).

Since most of Christ's disciples lived around the Sea of Galilee, it is not surprising many of them were fishermen. The Gospels faithfully describe the life, work and occasional dangers of fishing in the lake. Why did dangerous storms sometimes arise on what normally should have been a large, placid inland lake?

"We do not realize," explains biblical geographer George Adam Smith, "that the greater part of our Lord's ministry was accomplished at what may be truly called the bottom of a trench, 680 feet below sea level . . . The cold currents, as they pass from the west, are sucked down in vortices of air, or by the narrow gorges that break upon the Lake. Hence sudden storms arise [for] which the region is notorious" (The Historical Geography of the Holy Land, 1931, p. 286).

Some who have doubted the biblical accounts of sudden storms on the lake have been caught by surprise. William Barclay notes: "Dr. W.M. Christie, who spent many years in Galilee, mentioned of a company of visitors who were standing on the shore of Lake Galilee, and, noting the glassy surface of the water and the smallness of the lake, expressed doubts as to the possibility of such storms as those described in the gospels. Almost immediately the wind sprang up. In twenty minutes the sea was white with foam-crested waves. Great billows broke over the towers at the corners of the city walls, and the visitors were compelled to seek shelter from the blinding spray, though now two hundred yards from the lakeside. In less than half an hour the placid sunshine had become a raging storm. This is what happened to Jesus and His disciples on certain occasions" (Daily Bible Study Commentary, Bible Explorer Software).

Discovery of a fishing boat of Jesus's time

A few years ago archaeologists excavated a fishing boat dating to around the time of Christ.

"An example of the sort of boat Jesus and the disciples used was found buried in mud on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee in January 1986," notes archaeologist John McRay. "It is the first work boat found on an inland lake in the entire Mediterranean area. The boat, dating between the first century B.C. and the end of the first century A.D., was excavated that February and found to measure 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4.5 feet high. It would have accommodated about fifteen average-size men of Jesus' Galilee . . . Originally it had a mast for sailing and two oars on each side. Jesus and his disciples could easily fit into such a boat and their use is mentioned or inferred often in the Gospels" (McRay, p. 170).

Many details in the Gospels, such as fishing methods and the use of different nets, reflect an accurate description of Jesus' time. When Christ said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea" (Matthew 13:47), He was referring to the most common method of commercial fishing in his day—using a seine.

Historian and Jewish fisherman Mendel Nun, who in 1993 had lived near the Sea of Galilee for 50 years, writes: "The seine, or dragnet, is the oldest type of net. Until recently, it was the most important fishing method on the lake . . . [The parable of the dragnet] exactly fits the function of

the seine. It is spread into the sea, then dragged to the shore; in the process all kinds of fish are caught, which the fishermen sitting on the shore sort out. The 'bad' ones refer to the scaleless catfish, forbidden by Jewish law and not even offered for sale" (Biblical Archaeology Review, November-December 1993, p. 52).

Matthew 4:18 describes a different type of net. "And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen." This refers to a cast net, which is used by a single fisherman. It is circular, some 20 feet in diameter, with lead sinkers attached to the edge.

"Like the seine," comments Mendel Nun, "the cast net is an ancient device. Complete cast nets have been found in Egyptian tombs dating to the second millennium B.C. Two kinds were used in the Sea of Galilee, one for large fish and the other for sardines" (ibid., p. 53).

No wonder this Jewish fishing expert concludes about the Gospel accounts, "I am continually surprised at how accurately the New Testament writers reflect natural phenomena on the lake" (ibid., p. 47).

The wedding in Cana

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding . . . There were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece" (John 2:1-2, 6).

One of the curious parts of the wedding account is the mention of large stone waterpots. In the ancient world such large containers were normally made of pottery or wood. It was an enormous and expensive effort to carve large pots from stone. Was this a period when the purity laws were enforced to the point that these pots were common in Israel?

"Until recently this question plagued historians of the era called the late second Temple period," writes Israeli archaeologist Yitzhak Magen. "Indeed, recent excavations have confirmed that Jews of all social and economic levels were deeply concerned with ritual purity in this period . . . Stone vessels were considered immune from impurity, and their popularity during this short period provides strong evidence of heightened interest in ritual purity among all Jews . . .

"Large vessels—sometimes made from stone blocks weighing almost 800 pounds—were manufactured on massive heavy-duty lathes. Some of these vessels . . . may have been used to store ritually clean water for washing hands, as illustrated in the New Testament story of Jesus' transformation of water into wine at Cana, in Galilee . . . Stone vessels have been unearthed at more than 60 sites" (Biblical Archaeological Review, September-October 1998, pp. 49-50).

Even such incidental details as the large waterpots mentioned in the Gospels have been explained by archaeological findings and discovered to have been in common use at the time.

Jacob's well and Mount Gerizim

"So he came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob's well was there" (John 4:5-6).

"Jacob's well," explains professor McRay, "is one of the few sites whose identity is agreed upon by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans alike." It is still in use. "During annual visits over the past twenty years," he adds, "I have always found cold, refreshing water in the well" (McRay, p. 181).

Nearby, on the northern top of Mount Gerizim, archaeologists have found what appears to be the remains of the temple of Mount Gerizim mentioned in John 4:20. The building was 66 feet long by 66 feet wide by 30 feet high and was in the center of a large courtyard.

"The discovery of this monumental structure dating from the Hellenistic period on Mount Gerizim above Shechem, the chief city of the Samaritans," comments The International Bible Dictionary, "has led the excavator to call the complex the Samaritan temple and the unhewn stone half cube the Samaritan altar of sacrifice [which present-day Samaritans still revere]. The remains of this altar would have been visible to Jesus and the Samaritan woman from Jacob's well, as it is today" (Supplement Volume, 1976, p. 361).

So the scene from John 4 of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, with Jacob's well and the temple of Gerizim as the backdrop, also reflects a historical setting.

Through these archaeological finds we have covered some areas of Jesus' early ministry. In the next chapter we will continue our study of His life and times.

Jesus Christ's Later Ministry

In the previous two chapters, we considered some of the many archaeological findings that shed light on Judea in the early first century, when Jesus Christ grew to manhood and began His ministry. We continue in this issue with other findings that shed light on and confirm the accuracy of historical details recorded for us in the Gospels.

While Christ's early ministry took place primarily in Galilee, His later ministry centered on Jerusalem. In Galilee, in spite of His many miracles and inspired preaching, He was eventually rejected by most of the townspeople.

"Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day'" (Matthew 11:20-23).

An unusual pool

The Gospels often note that Jesus and His disciples traveled to Jerusalem for the biblical festivals God commanded in Leviticus 23 (Luke 2:41-42; 22:7-20; John 2:13, 23; 7:1-2, 8, 10, 14, 37-38). John 5 records an event that took place during one of these feasts, although it doesn't specify which (to learn more about these biblical feasts, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind).

"After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water ...

"Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' The sick man answered Him, 'Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me.' Jesus said to him, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk.' And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked ..." (John 5:1-9).

For years critics questioned John's description of a pool "having five porches," because such an architectural design would be highly unusual. But that changed when excavators began digging in the area about a century ago.

"... When Bethesda was cleared of the rubble of centuries and brought once more to the light of day, [archaeologists discovered] a vast double pool covering 5,000 square yards to the north of the Temple area. It in fact had five colonnades. Four of these surrounded the whole place, but

the fifth porch, in which the sick folk lay waiting to be healed, stood on a ridge of rock which divided the two pools" (Werner Keller, The Bible as History, 1982, p. 423).

The fifth "porch," which had led some to question or even dismiss John's account, was this columned walkway separating the two pools. John's description was proven accurate.

John McRay, archaeologist and professor of New Testament at Wheaton College Graduate School in Illinois, adds that in the excavations "many fragments of column bases, capitals and drums [column sections] were found, which probably belonged to the five porches (i.e., porticoes or colonnaded walkways) of the pool John mentions" (Archaeology & the New Testament, 1991, p. 187).

The Pool of Siloam

The apostle John mentioned another pool in connection with another of Jesus Christ's miracles of healing. "Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth ... He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing" (John 9:1, 6-7).

This pool, too, has been discovered, and thousands of visitors to Jerusalem visit it each year. Professor McRay explains: "[The pool] was built by King Hezekiah in the eighth century B.C. at the southern end of a long tunnel he cut through solid rock to bring water from Gihon Spring to the pool inside the city walls (2 Kings 20:20) ...

"The appearance of the pool has changed through the centuries; it has become considerably smaller (50 feet long by 15 feet wide) than originally. In 1897 F.J. Bliss and A.C. Dickie uncovered a court about 75 feet square, in the center of which was the pool. It was probably surrounded by a colonnaded portico ... After the 1897 excavations, the people of the village of Silwan (an Arabic rendering of Siloam) built a mosque with a minaret over the northwest corner of the pool, and it still stands above the pool" (ibid., p. 188).

Professor McRay notes that "discoveries of the Well of Jacob (John 4:12), the Pool of Bethesda (5:2) [and] the Pool of Siloam (9:7) ... have lent historical credibility to the text of John ... These are but a few of the examples that could be produced which put New Testament contexts squarely in the stream of history and geography" (pp. 18-19).

Conflicts with Pharisaic practices

Of all the human adversaries during His ministry, the Pharisees caused Jesus the most trouble. They had imposed tedious religious regulations on the practicing Jewish population. Jesus described their effect: "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men" (Matthew 23:4-5).

Christ denounced the Pharisees' hypocrisy of enacting many religious laws that obscured or even contradicted the intent of the laws God had revealed to Israel. He compared them to

"whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (verses 27-28).

Whitewashed tombs were a common sight in Israel. The practice of whitewashing grave sites was based on a ritual established by the Pharisees.

Archaeologists have uncovered many ancient tombs and other burial places in Israel. They range from a simple hole in the ground with a stone covering to elaborate burial chambers for the rich. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says: "For groups without a settled abode, interment must have taken the form of roadside burials ... Under Greco-Roman influence, Palestine tombs took on the exterior forms and ornamentation of classic architecture ... Exposed areas were whitewashed to obviate uncleanness through accidental contact at night (Matthew 23:27)" (1979, Vol. 1, pp. 557, 559, "Burial").

William Barclay gives further information that helps us understand burial practices of the time: "Here again is a picture which any Jew would understand. One of the commonest places for tombs was by the wayside. We have already seen that anyone who touched a dead body became unclean (Numbers 19:16). Therefore, anyone who came into contact with a tomb automatically became unclean. At one time in particular the roads of Palestine were crowded with pilgrims—at the time of the Passover Feast. For a man to become unclean on his way to the Passover Feast would be a disaster, for that meant he would be debarred from sharing in it. It was then Jewish practice in the month of Adar to whitewash all wayside tombs, so that no pilgrims might accidentally come into contact with one of them and be rendered unclean.

"So, as a man journeyed the roads of Palestine on a spring day, these tombs would glint white, and almost lovely, in the sunshine; but within they were full of bones and bodies whose touch would defile. That, said Jesus, was a precise picture of what the Pharisees were. Their outward actions were the actions of intensely religious men; their inward hearts were foul and putrid with sin" (Daily Bible Study Commentary, Bible Explorer Software).

Christ used this commonly seen feature of the Israelite countryside to drive home a spiritual point.

The Corban vow

Another conflict Jesus had with the Pharisees was over their laws and regulations that at times directly negated the Ten Commandments. One such example was the Corban vow.

In a stinging rebuke, Jesus told the Pharisees: "'All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and, "He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death." But you say, "If a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban'— (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do'" (Mark 7:9-13).

In the 20th century archaeologists have found dramatic confirmation of this kind of vow. In the 1950s they discovered a stone coffin inside a Jewish tomb in the Kidron Valley southeast of

Jerusalem. The lid bore an inscription stating the contents were "corban." The inscription reads, "All that a man may find to his profit in this ossuary [is] an offering (corban) to God from him who is within it" (McRay, p. 194).

The vow was inscribed in the hope that it would dissuade any potential thief from taking any valuable contents, such as jewelry, by declaring all had been consecrated to God and that the robber would be committing sacrilege to take it and use it for any other purpose.

But why would Jesus condemn this kind of vow? The passage in Mark points out the kinds of problems that arose. Jesus was condemning a man-made vow that could break God's commandments. In the example He used, some, He said, were declaring part or all of their possessions "corban," or dedicated to God. In such circumstances a needy father or mother could not inherit a deceased son's goods because they had been declared "corban" and thus were consecrated to God.

This vow was based on a nonbiblical belief that a person would receive extra favor from God for such a vow. As time went along, this kind of vow was also used as an excuse to avoid helping a parent in need. As Jesus pointed out, such practices broke the Fifth Commandment, which tells us to honor our parents.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary explains: "Jesus showed how these religious leaders had in effect nullified this commandment. They could simply affirm that a particular item had been a gift devoted to God. Then the item could not be used by an individual but was kept separate. This was simply a clever way of keeping things from passing to one's parents. The person would of course continue to keep those things in his own home where they had been supposedly set aside for God.

"Such action was condemned by Jesus as being hypocritical, for while it appeared to be spiritual, it actually was done to keep one's possessions for himself. Thus this failure to help one's parents deliberately violated the fifth commandment ... Such action had been described by Isaiah centuries before (Isaiah 29:13). Their [the Pharisees'] religion had become a matter of action and man-made rules. Their hearts were far from God and consequently their worship was in vain" (Logos Software).

We will continue in the next chapter with the climactic events surrounding Jesus Christ's arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus Christ's Arrest, Trial and Crucifixion

In recent chapters, we have examined archaeological findings that shed light on the period of Jesus Christ's ministry in Judea in the early first century.

In the four Gospels no period of Christ's ministry is more detailed than the last few days when He was arrested, tried and crucified as a common criminal. What have archaeologists found that confirm and illuminate many of the details of Jesus' last days on earth?

Evidence of Caiaphas's tomb

Events rushed to a crescendo as Jesus and His disciples came to Jerusalem for that final Passover feast. The chief priests began to panic after hearing that in nearby Bethany Jesus had resurrected His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11).

How did they react to news of this miracle? "Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together a council and said, 'What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.' And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.' Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation ... Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death" (verses 47-53).

Amazingly, the tomb of this priest was discovered in 1990. Israeli archaeologist Zvi Greenhut, who confirmed the finding, describes the event:

"It was a cold day at the end of November when I received word at the Antiquities Authority that an old cave had been discovered ... When I arrived I observed that the roof of the cave had collapsed. But even while standing outside, I could see four ossuaries, or bone boxes, in the central chamber of the cave. To an archaeologist, this was a clear indication that this was a Jewish burial cave ... So it was that we discovered the final resting place of the Caiaphas family, one of whose priestly members presided at the trial of Jesus" ("Burial Cave of the Caiaphas Family," Biblical Archaeological Review, September-October 1992, pp. 29-30).

Two of the 12 stone boxes found had the name Caiaphas written on the side, and one contained the entire name, "Joseph, son of Caiaphas." Inside this box were the remains of a 60-year-old man, along with the bones of a woman and four younger people, probably those of his own family.

Archaeologist Ronny Reich provides further details of the find: "The most elaborately decorated ossuary found in this cave contains two inscriptions relating to Caiaphas ... The elderly man buried in the highly decorated ossuary was apparently Joseph. It was probably a forefather who had acquired this nickname [Caiaphas was apparently a nickname that meant "basket," probably from "basketmaker."]

"A person named Joseph with the nickname Caiaphas was the high priest in Jerusalem between 18 and 36 A.D. The New Testament provides only his nickname in the Greek form: Caiaphas (see Matthew 26:3, 57; Luke 3:2; John 11:49, 18:13-14, 24, 28; Acts 4:6). Josephus [the first-century Jewish historian] gives his proper name as well: Joseph Caiaphas, or elsewhere, 'Joseph who was called Caiaphas of the high priesthood.' In short, we are explicitly told by Josephus that Caiaphas was indeed a nickname" ("Caiaphas Name Inscribed on Bone Boxes," Biblical Archaeological Review, September-October 1992, p. 41).

Archaeologists have thus confirmed the existence of this important New Testament figure. They have also proven the existence of another leading character instrumental in the events surrounding Jesus' arrest, trial and execution.

The Pilate inscription

Once Jesus was arrested, on Caiaphas's orders, He was tried before Caiaphas and later sent to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The New Testament portrayal of Pilate agrees with other historical accounts. "Philo and Josephus unite in attributing dire and evil practices to Pilate, so that a dark character is ascribed to him" (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1989, Vol. 3, p. 813).

Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher (20 B.C.-A.D. 50), described Pilate as "a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate." He says Pilate's rule was characterized by "corruption, ... insolence, ... cruelty, ... continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity" (The Works of Philo, translated by C.D. Yonge, "On the Embassy to Gaius," pp. 301-302).

Years after Christ's crucifixion Pilate was sent to Rome to undergo a humiliating trial after ordering the massacre of some Samaritan pilgrims. Eusebius, the fourth-century historian, notes that Pilate was found guilty and exiled. In his shame he later committed suicide. Such was the end of this proud and corrupt governor.

For centuries Pilate was known only from scant historical records and the Gospels. No direct physical evidence had been found. Then, in 1961, a stone plaque engraved with Pilate's name and title was discovered in Caesarea, the Roman port and capital of Judea in Christ's day. "The two-foot by three-foot slab, now known as the Pilate Inscription, was ... apparently written to commemorate Pilate's erection and dedication of a Tiberium, a temple for the worship of Tiberias Caesar, the Roman emperor during Pilate's term over Judea.

"The Latin inscription of four lines gives his title as 'Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea,' a title very similar to that used of him in the Gospels (see Luke 3:1). This was the first archaeological find to mention Pilate, and again testified to the accuracy of the Gospel writers. Their understanding of such official terms indicates they lived during the time of their use and not a century or two thereafter, when such terms would have been forgotten" (Randall Price, The Stones Cry Out, 1997, pp. 307-308).

Gruesome evidence of crucifixion

Until recently some scholars considered the description of Christ's crucifixion to be false. They thought it was impossible for a human body to be held up by nails driven into the hands and feet since the flesh would eventually tear away. Instead they thought the victims must have been bound by ropes.

Yet, in 1968, the body of a crucified man dating to the first century was found in Jerusalem. Here the true method of crucifixion was discovered: His ankles, not his feet, had been nailed and could easily support his weight.

Archaeologist Randall Price explains: "This rare find has proved to be one of the most important archaeological witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion as recorded in the Gospels. First, it reveals afresh the horrors of the Roman punishment ... This method of execution forced the weight of the body to be placed on the nails, causing terribly painful muscle spasms and eventually death by the excruciating process of asphyxiation ... Second, it was once claimed that the Gospel's description of the method of crucifixion was historically inaccurate ... The discovery of the nail-pierced ankle bone refutes those who say nails could not have been used" (Price, pp. 309-310).

The Roman law of the time prescribed crucifixion as punishment for the most serious offenses, such as rebellion, treason and robbery. A famous example of mass crucifixions took place in 71 B.C. when Spartacus led a slave rebellion against Rome. He ultimately failed, and the 6,000 captured slaves were crucified.

The Jews knew of crucifixions even before Roman rule, for around 87 B.C. the Jewish king Alexander Janneus had 800 rebellious Pharisees crucified. Josephus, who witnessed the crucifixion of his fellow Jews during the siege of Jerusalem (A.D. 66-70), called it "the most wretched of deaths." It continued to be the punishment for high crimes until the time of Emperor Constantine, when it was finally abolished.

Was Jesus crucified on a cross?

The exact shape of the stake or cross used to crucify Jesus is not known, since the Romans used several styles.

The Greek word translated "cross" is stauros. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words gives background information on the word. "Stauros ... denotes, primarily, 'an upright pale or stake.' On such malefactors were nailed for execution. Both the noun and the verb staroo, 'to fasten to a stake or pale,' are originally to be distinguished from the ecclesiastical form of a two beamed 'cross.' The shape of the latter had its origin in ancient Chaldea [Babylonia], and was used as the symbol of the god Tammuz (being in the shape of the mystic Tau, the initial of his name) in that country and in adjacent lands, including Egypt.

"By the middle of the 3rd cent. A.D. the churches had either departed from, or had travestied, certain doctrines of the Christian faith. In order to increase the prestige of the apostate ecclesiastical system pagans were received into the churches apart from regeneration by faith, and were permitted largely to retain their pagan signs and symbols. Hence the Tau or T, in its most frequent form, with the cross-piece lowered, was adopted to stand for the 'cross' of Christ.

"As for the Chi, or X, which Constantine declared he had seen in a vision leading him to champion the Christian faith, that letter was the initial of the word 'Christ' and had nothing to do

with 'the Cross' (for xulon, 'a timber beam, a tree' ...)." (1985, "Cross, Crucify").

The empty tomb

The Gospel writers give many details of Jesus' burial and tomb. "Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him. When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed ...

"On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, 'Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, "After three days I will rise." Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day' ... So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard" (Matthew 27:57-66).

How do the Gospel accounts match up with archaeologists' discoveries about first-century burial practices? Several tombs have been found around Jerusalem that perfectly fit the description given by the Gospel writers. "In Roman times the entrance was often closed with a large circular stone, set up on edge and rolled in its groove to the mouth of the tomb so as to close it securely. This stone could then be further secured by a strap, or by sealing. Pilate thus directed that the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, in which the body of Jesus was laid, should be carefully sealed and made as inviolable as possible (Mt. 27:66)" (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 559, "Burial").

When the Romans wanted to secure a tomb, they attached a cord across the circular stone. They secured this strap with wax and stamped it with the seal of imperial Rome. To tamper with the seal was to defy Roman authority and risk the death penalty. Guards were then placed around the tomb with orders to defend it at all costs; if any fell asleep they would pay with their lives. With all these safeguards in place, a tomb was considered to be completely secured and untouchable.

Yet, when Jesus was resurrected and an angel opened the tomb, the Bible records that the guards "shook for fear of [the angel] and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:4). When the guards revived and saw the empty tomb, they immediately sought help from the chief priests, for they knew they faced the death penalty.

"Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, 'Tell them [the Roman authorities], "His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept." And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure.' So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day" (verses 11-15).

True to the historical description of Pilate, we see that even the chief priests understood that the Roman governor was corrupt and subject to being bribed.

Conclusion on the Gospels

Through archaeology many details of the descriptions of Jesus' trial, crucifixion and burial have been confirmed. Archaeologist Price considers the all-important implications: "... Archaeology has shown us that the facts that support faith [in the resurrection of Jesus] are accurate—an identifiable tomb attesting to literal events-faith in the Christ of history does depend upon a historically empty tomb for its reality. While archaeology can only reveal the tomb, the persons and events attending to its historic purpose (Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, crucifixion, and so on), the resurrection is interwoven with these facts so as to command the same consideration" (Price, pp. 315, 318).

We can summarize the purpose of this series on the Gospels with an appropriate quote: "Five gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and one you will find in the Land they call holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you" (Bargil Pixner, With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel, 1992, back cover).

The Book of Acts: The Church Begins

As discussed in recent chapters, archaeologists have made many discoveries that verify and illuminate our understanding of the four Gospels. After the Gospels, the next section in the New Testament we will survey is the books of the Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts.

The book of Acts is simply a continuation of one of the Gospel accounts. Luke compiled his Gospel about Jesus Christ as the first volume of a two-part work. In his first manuscript he covered the life of Jesus; in the second he described the early history of the Church Jesus founded.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary notes: "The Acts of the Apostles is the name given to the second part of a two-volume work traditionally identified as having been written by Luke, a companion of the apostle Paul. Originally the two volumes circulated together as two parts of one complete writing" (Richard Longenecker, 1981, Vol. 9, p. 207).

Luke explains to Theophilus, to whom he dedicated this work, the purpose of his first tome: "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up ..." (Acts 1:1-2). The phrase former account in this first verse is proton logos in Greek. It refers to the first papyrus roll of a larger work, called in Greek tomos, from which we get our English word tome.

In the second scroll Luke relates events that took place after Jesus "was parted from them [the disciples] and carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51). It covers about the first 30 years of Church history.

A scholar attacks Acts

About a century ago British scholar William Ramsay focused on the book of Acts to try to show it was rife with geographical and archaeological errors. After all, many scholars of his day, equipped with the tools of textual criticism and archaeology, had exposed many errors in other classic writings. This eminent humanity professor diligently prepared himself by studying archaeology and geography before departing for the Middle East and Asia Minor in his quest to prove Luke's history of the early Church was mostly myth.

His quest didn't turn out as he expected. After a quarter century of research in what is today Israel and Turkey, where he carefully retraced the steps of the apostles as described in the book of Acts, this famous unbeliever shook the intellectual world when he announced he had converted to Christianity. He confessed this radical change of mind and heart was thanks in great part to his surprise at the accuracy he found in Luke's narrative in Acts.

After decades of examining the historical and geographical details mentioned in the book, Ramsay concluded: "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy, he is possessed of the true historic sense ... In short this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians" (The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament, 1953, p. 80).

He went on to write many books about Acts and the epistles of Paul. Ultimately Ramsay was knighted for his contributions to the study of archaeology and geography.

The tomb of King David

When the Christian Church began on the Day of Pentecost, when its first 120 members received God's Spirit, thousands of Jewish pilgrims were visiting Jerusalem worshiping at the time of that holy festival (Acts 2:1-5).

That day the apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, delivered an inspired sermon to the Jewish crowd. Thousands heard and repented of their sins. Speaking of the recent resurrection of Jesus, he quoted from one of King David's prophetic psalms: "For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:27; Psalm 16:10).

Peter continued: "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29, emphasis added). Peter, speaking in the temple area in Jerusalem, could point to the nearby tombs of the kings of Israel-specifically David's burial site.

Although it was not an Israelite or Jewish custom to bury the dead in towns or cities, royalty was an exception. The Bible records that "David rested with his fathers, and was buried in the City of David" (1 Kings 2:10). Many later Israelite kings were also buried in Jerusalem, although not all in the designated tombs of the kings. For instance, evil King Jehoram was buried "in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings" (2 Chronicles 21:20).

Several hundred years later, during the restoration of Jerusalem under Nehemiah, the area around the tombs of the kings was repaired. "After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk ... made repairs as far as the place in front of the tombs of David ..." (Nehemiah 3:16).

Josephus, a Jewish historian born shortly after Peter gave his Pentecost sermon, wrote that a few decades earlier Herod the Great had broken into David's tomb at night to plunder its riches, only to discover a previous king had already looted it (Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVI, Chapter VII, Section 1). David's tomb was widely known even when Josephus wrote his account decades after Peter's sermon.

A.T. Robertson notes: "His [David's] tomb was on Mt. Zion where most of the kings were buried. The tomb was said to have fallen into ruins in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian [A.D. 117-138]" (Word Pictures in the New Testament, Bible Explorer software).

Although archaeologists don't agree on whether the extensive tomb area discovered almost a century ago in the southern end of Jerusalem is the location of the tombs of the kings of Israel, the location agrees with accounts mentioned in the Bible and does have the backing of some prominent scholars.

Hershel Shanks, editor of Biblical Archaeology Review, writes: "The proposed site of David's tomb, and of others adjacent to it, is precisely where one would expect to find the burial site mentioned in the Bible-in the southern part of the City of David, an area that would normally be forbidden to burials.

"In 1913 to 1914 a Frenchman named Raymond Weill excavated this area and found several tombs that he numbered T1 to T8 ... The most magnificent of these tombs is T1. It is a kind of long tunnel or artificially excavated cave 521/2 feet long, over 8 feet wide and over 13 feet high ... The fact that some extravagant, even ostentatious tombs were located precisely where the Bible says the kings of Judah, including King David, were buried certainly suggests to a reasonable mind that the fanciest of these tombs (T1) may well have belonged to King David" (Biblical Archaeological Review, January-February, 1995, p. 64).

Precise identification is difficult because the area was heavily quarried in later centuries and only portions of the tombs remain. Whether more research can confirm this site as David's tomb or not, we can be confident that during Peter's sermon given on the Day of Pentecost, when the New Testament Church began, he could point to an area in Jerusalem where everyone knew David's tomb was located and could attest that his remains were still there.

David obviously had not risen from the dead, but now Peter and many other witnesses could confirm that it had been Jesus' tomb, not David's, that had opened and from which Jesus had come back to life, confirming He was the Messiah. Thousands of Jewish listeners could not refute the evidence. This proof, among others, led many to accept Jesus as the Messiah immediately (Acts 2:41).

Gamaliel the wise

During the days and weeks after Peter's sermon, the apostles faced violent opposition, including being thrown in jail.

During their trial before their incarceration, many Jewish authorities plotted to kill them, but one of the chief religious leaders spoke up in their defense:

"Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people ... And he said to them: 'Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men ... I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it-lest you even be found to fight against God.' And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go" (Acts 5:34-40).

This Gamaliel, who opposed the apostles' execution, was a teacher of Paul (Acts 22:3). He was the grandson of Hillel, the founder of a dominant school of the Pharisees, a major branch of Judaism.

Gamaliel's family name has been confirmed by archaeological findings. In a tomb in the catacombs of Beth-Shearim, near the Sea of Galilee, in a section called the Tomb of the Patriarchs, one of the graves has an inscription in Hebrew and Greek: "This [tomb] is of the Rabbi Gamaliel." The Gamaliel of Bible fame was the first of an illustrious rabbinic family bearing his name. This tomb was that of one of his descendants.

The historian Josephus and some Talmudic works also mention Gamaliel, describing him as a benevolent and brilliant man. William Barclay adds: "He was a kindly man with a far wider tolerance than his fellows. He was, for instance, one of the very few Pharisees who did not

regard Greek culture as sinful. He was one of the very few to whom the title 'Rabban' had been given. Men called him 'The Beauty of the Law.' When he died it was said, 'Since Rabban Gamaliel died there has been no more reverence for the Law; and purity and abstinence died out at the same time'" (The Daily Study Bible Commentary, Bible Explorer software). So we see another biblical figure mentioned in the Scriptures confirmed by sources outside the Bible.

History confirms still another biblical character

As the gospel spread to the outlying areas of Israel, Peter arrived in Samaria to preach the Word of God. There he met a magician named Simon, who was baptized but was later rejected by Peter and John for trying to bribe his way into a position of power and influence in the Church (Acts 8:18-24).

Nothing else is directly mentioned in the Scriptures about this shady character, known in history as Simon Magus. However, about a century after Simon's death, writings appear that describe his activities after the apostles rejected him.

Writing to the Romans, Justin Martyr comments: "There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Caesar [A.D. 41-54], and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devil's operating in him. He was considered a god, and as a god was honored by you with a statue, which statue was erected on the river Tiber, between two bridges, and bore this inscription, in the language of Rome: 'Simoni Deo Sancto' [To Simon the holy God]. And almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him ..." (The Ante-Nicene Fathers, "The First Apology of Justin," p. 171).

In 1574 excavators found a fragment of marble on an island in the Tiber River with the inscription "Semoni Sanco Deu Fidio." Some interpret this as referring to a Sabine deity, Semo Sancus, but most likely it was part of the statue Justin Martyr described as having been dedicated to Simon Magus.

The editors of The Ante-Nicene Fathers make this point: "It is very generally supposed that Justin was mistaken in understanding this to have been a statue erected to Simon Magus. This supposition rests on the fact that in the year 1574 there was dug up in the island of the Tiber a fragment of marble, with the inscription 'Semoni Sanco Deo,' etc., being probably the base of a statue erected to the Sabine deity Semo Sancus. This inscription Justin is supposed to have mistaken for the one he gives above.

"This has always seemed to us very slight evidence on which to reject so precise a statement as Justin here makes; a statement which he would scarcely have hazarded in an apology addressed to Rome, where every person had the means of ascertaining its accuracy. If, as is supposed, he made a mistake, it must have been at once exposed, and other writers would not have so frequently repeated the story as they have done" (ibid., footnote, p. 171).

Whether the base of the statue was dedicated to Simon Magus or not, the historicity of this biblical personage is also confirmed in literature of the second and third centuries.

Paul in Damascus

After the gospel went to Samaria, it spread northward to Damascus, where a dramatic conversion took place-that of Saul, who became the apostle Paul. After his conversion God told him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:6).

After Paul arrived in Damascus, Jesus spoke in a vision to Ananias, one of the Christians living there: "So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying" (Acts 9:11).

The street called Straight was one of the main avenues in Damascus. The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains: "The street called Straight was an east-west street that is still one of the main thoroughfares of Damascus, the Derb el-Mustaqim. It had colonnaded halls on either side and imposing gates at each end ... and presumably was as well known in antiquity as Regent Street in London or Michigan Avenue in Chicago today. The directions included not only the name of the street but also the house where Saul could be found" (Longenecker, p. 373).

When the Jews persecuted Paul in Damascus, his friends lowered him from the city's walls in a basket (Acts 9:25). Archaeologists have discovered sections of this ancient wall, which the Romans built. John McRay writes: "Part of the Roman wall has been found about 1000 feet south of the East Gate (Bab Sharqi) beneath Saint Paul's Chapel and Window. Under the present Ottoman gateway, this small chapel was built by Greek Catholics over a gate from the Roman period. Tradition associates the spot with Paul's escape by a basket that was lowered from a window in the wall (2 Cor. 11:33)" (Archaeology and the New Testament, 1991, p. 234).

Magnificent Caesarea

Meanwhile in Jerusalem Peter had been arrested again and this time was sentenced to death by Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great. A few decades ago this ruler, too, was confirmed as a historical figure when Israeli archaeologist Benjamin Mazar found scale weights with Herod Agrippa's name and title that date to the fifth year of his reign.

When Herod Agrippa heard of Peter's miraculous escape (Acts 12:5-9), he flew into a rage. "But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there" (verse 19).

Caesarea was an impressive artificial port built by Herod the Great. Named in honor of Augustus Caesar, it became the Roman headquarters of Judea. Herod also had a magnificent palace there where he would court Roman officials.

"The city included buildings typical of a Hellenistic city, such as a theater, amphitheater, hippodrome, aqueduct, colonnaded street, and an impressive temple dedicated to Caesar" (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1962, Vol. 1, p. 480). Most of the remains of these buildings have recently been found by archaeologists, including a stone plaque that mentions Pontius Pilate [see The Good News, May-June 2000, p. 25].

"I was on the supervisory staff at Caesarea from the beginning of full-scale excavations in 1972 until 1982," writes John McKay. "Our work has largely confirmed the impression given by Josephus in both his Wars and Antiquities, of the grand scale on which Herod built to satisfy his own vanity and that of the emperor Augustus" (Archaeology and the New Testament, 1991, pp.

139-140).

Herod Agrippa's death

The Bible also records Herod Agrippa's unexpected death at Caesarea. "Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died" (Acts 12:20-23).

Josephus offers additional details in his independent account of Herod Agrippa's death: "On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner ... and presently his flatterers cried out ... 'Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto reverenced thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.' Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery ... A severe pain also arose in his belly ... And when he had been quite worn by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life ..." (Antiquities of the Jews, XIX, viii, 2).

The two accounts, the Bible and Josephus, in this complement each other. Josephus does not mention the origin of the stomach pain, but the Bible mentions it was because of "worms." Luke, the physician, used the Greek word skolekobrotos in reference to Herod Agrippa's terminal condition. The word refers to tapeworms or other intestinal worms, which can block the intestinal tract and cause great pain and sometimes lead to death, as was the case here.

We will continue our survey through the book of Acts in the next chapter.

The Book of Acts: The Message Spreads

In this chapter, we proceed with our survey of archaeological and historical findings that verify and illuminate the accounts recorded in the Bible. In our last chapter we surveyed the first 12 chapters of Acts, in which the focus is on the exploits of the original apostles.

We pick up the story as the emphasis shifts to the travels of the apostle Paul. How accurate are these accounts? Thanks to the modern tools of archaeology, researchers have found much cultural, historical and geographical background material that supports the biblical account of Paul's trips through the Mediterranean world.

Sergius Paulus, governor of Cyprus

"So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they [the apostles Paul and Barnabas] went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus ... Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man" (Acts 13:4-7, emphasis added throughout).

From Antioch Paul and Barnabas first went to Cyprus, Barnabas's birthplace (Acts 4:36). Historians have confirmed several background details about this account. For example, the Roman orator Cicero mentions in one of his books that Paphos was indeed the Roman headquarters of Cyprus during Roman rule (Ad Familiares, XIII.48).

Also, Luke is correct in mentioning that Cyprus was governed by a proconsul when Paul and Barnabas visited the island. Before A.D. 22 Cyprus had been administered by a direct representative of the emperor, called a propraetor. But after 22 the island's rule was turned over to the Roman senate, whose representatives were called proconsuls. "Annexed by the Romans in 55 B.C.," notes The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, "Cyprus became a senatorial province in 22 B.C., with a governor bearing the title of proconsul, as Acts 13:7 correctly names Sergius Paulus, who received Barnabas and Paul" (1962, Vol. 3, p. 648).

The Expositor's Bible Commentary adds: "That Luke distinguishes correctly between senatorial and imperial provinces and has the former governed by a proconsul on behalf of the senate and the latter governed by a propraetor representing the emperor says much for his accuracy, for the status of provinces changed with the times" (Richard Longenecker, Vol. 9, 1981, notes on Acts 18:12-13, p. 485).

Archaeologists have also found evidence indicating Sergius Paulus was indeed a Roman governor of Cyprus. In 1877 an inscription was uncovered a short distance north of Paphos bearing Sergius Paulus's name and title of proconsul.

In addition, in 1887 his name was found on a memorial stone in Rome. "On a boundary stone of [Emperor] Claudius, his name [Sergius Paulus] is found among others, as having been appointed (A.D. 47) one of the curators of the banks and the channel of the river Tiber. After serving his three years as proconsul at Cyprus, he returned to Rome, where he held the office

referred to" ("Sergius Paulus," Easton's Bible Dictionary, Bible Explorer software).

It is also true that in those days proconsuls used seers for advice. "These were intensely superstitious times," writes William Barclay, "and most great men, even an intelligent man like Sergius Paulus, kept private wizards, fortune tellers who dealt in magic and spells" (Daily Study Bible, 1975, Bible Explorer software).

To the Unknown God in Athens

From Cyprus Paul eventually made his way to Athens, the capital of Greek philosophy. "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw thatthe city was given over to idols ... Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:16, 22-23).

Why was Paul so incensed with the idols in Athens? Is this an accurate description of the place? A.T. Robertson notes: "Pliny [the Roman writer] states that in the time of Nero [A.D. 54-68], Athens had over 30,000 public statues besides countless private ones in the homes. Petronius [a Roman satirist] sneers that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Every gateway or porch had its protecting god" (Word Pictures of the New Testament, notes on Acts 17:16).

What about the altar "to the unknown god"? Has there been any confirmation that such altars existed? Archaeologist John McRay mentions: "Pausanias [the Greek historian], who visited Athens between 143 and 159 A.D. saw such altars. In describing his trip from the harbor to Athens he wrote: 'The Temple of Athene Skiras is also here, and one of Zeus further off, and altars of the 'Unknown gods' ... Apollonius of Tyana, who died in A.D. 98, spoke of Athens as the place 'where altars are set up in honor even of unknown gods' ..." (Archaeology & the New Testament, 1991, p. 304).

In 1909 an archaeological expedition uncovered an altar with the inscription "To unknown gods" in Pergamum, a Roman province. McRay comments that the idolatry in Athens was so widespread that Athenians built altars to unknown gods so they would leave no one out. "The adherents of ancient polytheistic religions," he says, "characterized as they were by superstitious ignorance, may have simply erected altars to unknown gods 'so that no deity might be offended by human neglect'" (ibid.).

Jews expelled from Rome

From Athens Paul traveled a short way to another Greek city, Corinth. "After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome), and he came to them" (Acts 18:2).

Were Jews expelled from Rome during the reign of Emperor Claudius? The Roman historian

Suetonius records such an order: "As the Jews were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus, he banished them from Rome" (Life of Claudius, 25.4). It is estimated some 20,000 Jews eventually were expelled, among them Aquila and Priscilla.

It is worthwhile to note this expulsion decree is a key date for fixing Pauline chronology. "One example of how archaeology has contributed to establishing a Pauline chronology," writes Professor McRay, "is that now we can set the approximate beginning of Paul's work in Corinth on his second journey. The key is found in Acts 18:2 where we learn that when Paul arrived in Corinth he found Priscilla and Aquila, who had lately come from Italy, having been banished from Rome in a general expulsion of Jews under Claudius, who reigned from 41-54. This event is referred to by Suetonius and others and can be dated to A.D. 49" (McRay, pp. 225-226).

Who was this Chrestus who was responsible for the Jewish riots? The subject has been intensely debated. Since the name Chrestus and Christus are pronounced alike, it is likely that it had to do with the dissension in the Jewish community over the newly established Christianity and the teachings of Christ.

F.F. Bruce mentions that Chrestus could have simply been a Jewish troublemaker, but he adds: "It is more likely that [Suetonius] had the Founder of Christianity in mind, but that, writing some seventy years after the event and not being particularly interested in Christian origins, he consulted some record of the riots and imagined wrongly that Chrestus, who was mentioned as the leader of one of the parties concerned, was actually in Rome at the time, taking a prominent part in the strife. In fact, what we have in this statement of Suetonius is the dissension and disorder in the Jewish community at Rome resulting from the introduction of Christianity into one or more of the synagogues of the city" (The International Commentary of the New Testament, 1974, p. 368, "Acts").

Later Aquila and Priscilla were to become instrumental in Paul's ministry. They gave him a job in Corinth (Acts 18:3) and traveled with him to Ephesus (verse 19). They then served as hosts for a church group in their home and sent their greetings to their Corinthian friends in one of Paul's letters (1 Corinthians 16:19). Sometime after Claudius's death in 54, they returned to Rome and were included in Paul's greetings to the church members there (Romans 16:3).

Gallio, proconsul of Corinth

During Paul's long stay in Corinth his preaching eventually led to conflict with the Jews there. "And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. WhenGallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat" (Acts 18:11-12).

Here Luke mentions another Roman governor of the time. Has any evidence been found to corroborate the existence of Gallio?

It turns out Gallio was prominent in Roman history. He was the brother of the great Stoic writer Seneca, who was Emperor Nero's tutor. Gallio came from an illustrious family in Spain that eventually moved to Rome. His real name was Marcus Annaeus Novatus, but he was adopted by the orator Lucius Junius Gallio and afterwards bore his adoptive father's last name. His brother Seneca, who mentions him in his writings, said, "No mortal is so pleasant to any one

person as Gallio is to everybody."

It is striking that Luke also describes Gallio's stable and affable personality. After Paul's persecutors trumped up charges against Paul, Gallio quickly saw through their lies and dismissed the false accusations. To prevent such incidents from occurring again, he had the Jewish leaders punished for filing false charges (Acts 18:14-17). This set a legal precedent throughout the Roman Empire concerning Paul's mission and the Christian religion.

"If Gallio had accepted the Jewish charge," adds The Expositor's Bible Commentary, "and found Paul guilty of the alleged offense, provincial governors everywhere would have had a precedent, and Paul's ministry would have been severely restricted. As it was, Gallio's refusal to act in the matter was tantamount to the recognition of Christianity as a religio licita [an authorized religion]; and the decision of so eminent a Roman proconsul would carry weight wherever the issue arose again and give pause to those who might want to oppose the Christian movement ... For the coming decade or so, the Christian message could be proclaimed in the provinces of the empire without fear of coming into conflict with Roman law, thanks largely to Gallio's decision" (Longenecker, p. 486, notes on Acts 18:14-16).

It is remarkable that archaeological evidence has also been found confirming Gallio was the proconsul of Achaia, just as Luke had recorded.

"At Delphi," writes Professor McRay, "archaeologists found a stone which probably was once attached to the outer wall of the Temple of Apollo. Inscribed in it is a copy of a letter from Claudius to the city of Delphi, naming Gallio as the friend of Claudius and proconsul of Achaia" (McRay, p. 226).

What happened to Gallio after his encounter with Paul? Regrettably, after Claudius died in 54, Nero became the emperor. For a while Nero governed wisely under the tutorship of Gallio's brother Seneca. But five years later Nero did an about-face and gave himself to his passions and lusts. He expelled his mentor from his sight. His debauchery eventually caused Nero to become insane, and soon Nero was feeling tormented by Seneca's and Gallio's integrity and presence, so he had them both executed in 65.

F.F. Bruce says about Gallio: "He left Achaia because of a fever and went on a cruise for his health (Seneca, Moral Epistles, 14.1) ... In 65, along with Seneca and other members of his family, he fell victim to Nero's suspicions" (The International Commentary of the New Testament, 1974, p. 374, "Acts").

Such were the times in Rome. During this same period Nero began his murderous rampage of Christians in Rome after he falsely blamed them for having set the city on fire, which historians generally blame Nero as having started.

We will continue with our survey of Acts in the next chapter.

The Book of Acts: Paul's Later Travels

In the last two chapters we covered events from the start of the Christian Church to Paul's first travels through the Mediterranean world. In this chapter we conclude our discussion of the book of Acts by covering Paul's trips to Ephesus, Jerusalem and Rome.

The Ephesian scripts

After visiting Corinth Paul began his return journey to Jerusalem by way of Ephesus, an important city of Asia Minor.

"And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus ... And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (Acts 19:1, 18-20, emphasis added throughout).

The Greek word used here for "books" is biblos. The word originally referred to "the inner part ... of the stem of the papyrus [plant]" and later "came to denote the paper made from this bark in Egypt, and then a written 'book,' roll, or volume" (W.E. Vine, Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, 1985, "Book").

Since the 1870s archaeologists have made intensive efforts to find ancient papyrus scrolls, especially in Egypt, where the desert climate can preserve such fragile treasures. They have realized remarkable success, finding scrolls dating back to New Testament times. Among the papyrus scrolls discovered are some containing the wording of magical spells; these scrolls were used as amulets (charms).

"A number of such magical scrolls have survived to our day," notes F.F. Bruce. "There are especially famous examples in the London, Paris and Leyden collections. The special connection of Ephesus with magic is reflected in the use of the term 'Ephesian scripts' for such magical scrolls. The spells which they contain are the merest gibberish, a rigmarole of words and names considered to be unusually potent, arranged sometimes in patterns which were part of the essence of the spell, but they fetched high prices ... The closest parallel to the Ephesian exorcists' misuse of the name of Jesus appears in the Paris magical papyrus, No. 574, where we find an adjuration beginning on line 3018, 'I adjure thee by Jesus the God of the Hebrews'" (The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Acts, 1974, pp. 390-391).

The value of such scrolls that were destroyed is given in the Bible as "fifty thousand pieces of silver" (Acts 19:19), a sum scholars say would be worth around $48,000 in modern currency.

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world

Paul's preaching in Ephesus caused many to turn away from their idols and pagan practices. This led to an uprising among the craftsmen who made their living making statuettes of the goddess Diana and her temple.

"And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen.

He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said, 'Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands.

"So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship. Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians.' So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's travel companions" (Acts 19:23-29).

The temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. Its ruins were brought to light by the British archaeologist John T. Wood in 1869. Later he found, in remarkably good condition, the huge theater mentioned in Acts 19:29, which could seat more than 24,000 people.

William Barclay comments about the temple of Diana: "It was 425 feet long by 220 feet wide by 60 feet high. There were 127 pillars, each the gift of a king. They were all of glittering marble and 36 were marvelously gilt and inlaid. The great altar had been carved by Praxiteles, the greatest of all Greek sculptors. The image of Diana was not beautiful. It was a black, squat, many-breasted figure, signifying fertility; it was so old that no one knew where it had come from or even of what material it was made. The story was that it had fallen from heaven" (Daily Study Bible, 1975, comment on Acts 19:1-7).

Another reference work adds: "Thousands of pilgrims and tourists came to it from far and near; around it swarmed all sorts of tradesmen and hucksters who made their living by supplying visitors with food and lodging, dedicatory offerings, and souvenirs. The Temple of Artemis [Diana] was also a major treasury and bank of the ancient world, where merchants, kings, and even cities made deposits, and where their money could be kept safe under the protection of deity" (Richard Longenecker, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 9, 1981, p. 503).

It is not surprising that a lucrative trade of small statues of Diana and her temple existed in Ephesus. Commenting on verses 24 and 27, A.T. Robertson explains: "These small models of the temple with the statue of Artemis [Diana] inside would be set up in the houses or even worn as amulets ... Temples of Artemis [Diana] have been found in Spain and Gaul [France]" (Online Bible software, 1995, Word Pictures of the New Testament).

Throughout Europe archaeologists have found many statues of the many-breasted goddess Diana (or Artemis, as she was called by the Romans). In 1956 an impressive statue of Diana was discovered in Ephesus; it stands prominently in the museum there.

Into this scene of popular paganism entered the apostle Paul. Demetrius had accused him of teaching that "man-made gods are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26, New International Version). In other words, Paul had fearlessly taught keeping the Second Commandment and avoiding worship of religious images. Thanks to the help of friendly government officials in Ephesus, Paul was protected and the crowd was finally dispersed.

It is a bit ironic that, although the cult of the goddess Diana gradually died down, another cult eventually replaced her in Ephesus. "Christianity," says historian Marina Warner, "fastened on her [Diana] and added such typical feminine Christian virtues as modesty and shame to her personality ..." (Alone of All Her Sex, 1976, p. 47). Diana, continues Warner, "was associated with the moon ... as the Virgin Mary is identified with the moon and the stars' influence as well as with the forces of fertility and generation" (p. 224).

At the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 the veneration of Mary became an official element of the Roman church. Warner says about Diana: "Memories of her emblem, the girdle, survived in the city [Ephesus] where the Virgin Mary was proclaimed Theotokos [Mother of God], three hundred and fifty years after the silversmiths, who lived by making statuettes of Diana, rebelled against the preaching of Paul and shouted, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' (Acts 19:23-40). There could be, therefore, a chain of descent from ... Diana to the Virgin, for one tradition also holds that Mary was assumed into heaven from Ephesus ..." (ibid., p. 280).

Paul's arrest in Jerusalem

From Ephesus Paul hurried to Jeru-salem to stay there "if possible, on the Day of Pentecost" (Acts 20:16). When he arrived he soon went to the temple to worship and fulfill a vow along with four other Jewish Christians.

"Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, 'Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.' (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they had supposed that Paul had brought into the temple)" (Acts 21:27-29).

Paul was arrested on a false charge of having taken a gentile (a non-Israelite) inside the temple. Next to each temple entrance was an inscription warning everyone that only Israelites were permitted to enter.

Bruce explains: "That no Gentile might unwittingly enter into the forbidden areas, notices in Greek and Latin were fixed to the barrier at the foot of the steps leading up to the inner precincts, warning them that death was the penalty for further ingress. Two of these notices (both in Greek) have been found-one in 1871 and one in 1935-the text of which runs: 'No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death" (The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Acts, 1974, p. 434).

Paul's Journey to Rome

After Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, the Roman authorities discovered a plot to kill him and hurriedly sent him to nearby Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea. Since he was a Roman citizen, a rare and prestigious designation in those days, he was entitled to full military protection. In Caesarea he submitted to several preliminary hearings that left him unsatisfied, so he exercised his right as a Roman to appeal his case to the emperor in Rome.

The voyage to Rome, on a cargo ship, was harrowing. Luke accompanied Paul on the trip. His narrative is a masterpiece of accuracy down to tiniest details. "Luke's account of Paul's voyage to Rome," explains The Expositor's Bible Commentary, "stands out as one of the most vivid pieces of descriptive writing in the whole Bible. Its details regarding first-century seamanship are so precise and its portrayal of conditions on the eastern Mediterranean so accurate ... that even the most skeptical have conceded that it probably rests on a journal of some such voyage as Luke describes" (Longenecker, p. 556).

The remains of several ships similar to the one described by Luke have been found on the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. They corroborate the precision of Luke's account. "These grain ships were not small," notes Barclay. "They could be as large as 140 feet long and 36 feet wide. But in a storm they had certain grave disadvantages. They were the same at the bow as at the stern, except that the stern was swept up like a goose's neck. They had no rudder like a modern ship, but were steered with two great paddles coming out from the stern on each side. They were, therefore, hard to manage. Further, they had only one mast and on that mast one great square sail, made sometimes of linen and sometimes of stitched hides. With a sail like that they could not sail into the wind" (Daily Study Bible, comment on Acts 27:21).

On the voyage to Rome, Paul and his company were shipwrecked near the island of Malta and barely made it to the beach without drowning. There they waited several months until another ship took them to Rome.

The Appian Way

Luke's account continues: "And so we went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns" (Acts 28:14-15).

According to archaeological and literary evidence, Luke accurately recounts the way stations to enter Rome from the west, the shortest route from the nearest seaport. "At Neapolis, Paul and his contingent turned northwest to travel to Rome on the Via Appia -the oldest, straightest, and most perfectly made of all the Roman roads, named after the censor Appius Claudius who started its construction in 312 B.C. During the seven-day stopover at Puteoli, news of Paul's arrival in Italy reached Rome. So a number of Christians there set out to meet him and escort him back to Rome. Some of them got as far as the Forum of Appius (Appii Forum), one of the 'halting stations' built every ten to fifteen miles along the entire length of the Roman road system ... Others only got as far as the Three Taverns Inn, another halting station about thirty-three miles from Rome" (ibid., comment on Acts 28:15).

Luke thus provides us with a detailed and accurate account of Paul's apostolic missions during the first decades of the Church. The book of Acts ends with Paul waiting for his case to be heard by the emperor. From later historians we learn that he was set free and continued his apostolic journeys for several years until he was again arrested, imprisoned and ultimately

beheaded in Rome.

We will continue in the next chapter with a look at archaeological evidence that illuminates details of some of Paul's many letters to congregations and members of the early Church.

Archaeology and the Epistles

In the previous three chapters we covered events described in the book of Acts. We now turn our attention to the apostolic writings, better known as the epistles, addressed to specific individuals or congregations or larger groups of people.

How accurate are the epistles from an archaeological and historical point of view? We can be thankful that much background information is available about these writings that confirms their authenticity.

The apostolic letters

One of the first questions that comes to mind when examining the epistles is how they compare with the style and composition of other writings of the same era.
In the 20th century archaeologists discovered many private letters dating from the apostles' time that show the prevailing style of writing and correspondence. Written on papyrus, they corroborate that the apostles' letters are written in the style common in those days.

Scholar William Barclay notes about Paul's writings: "It is a great pity that Paul's letters were ever called epistles. They are in the most literal sense letters. One of the great lights shed on the interpretation of the New Testament has been the discovery and the publication of papyri. In the ancient world, papyrus was the substance on which most documents were written ... The sands of the Egyptian desert were ideal for their preservation, for papyrus, although very brittle, will last for ever so long as moisture does not get at it.

"As a result, from the Egyptian rubbish heaps, archaeologists have rescued hundreds of documents, marriage contracts, legal agreements, government forms, and, most interesting of all, private letters. When we read these private letters we find that there was a pattern to which nearly all conformed; and we find that Paul's letters reproduce exactly that pattern" (Daily Study Bible, Bible Explorer software, notes on Romans 1:1, emphasis added throughout).

So far some 15,000 papyrus documents have been documented that date from 2700 B.C. to New Testament times and well beyond.

From the biblical point of view the most important papyrus scrolls include:

- The 87 papyri containing parts of the Greek New Testament.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered some 50 years ago, which include books and commentaries about the Old Testament.
- The Septuagint version of the Old Testament (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was in common use in the time of the apostles).

The New Testament papyrus scrolls date from the late first to the seventh century and vary in size from scraps containing a few words to almost complete books of a Gospel, Acts or the Pauline epistles.

Grant Jeffrey compares the number of biblical writings discovered to other works found: "Modern scholars now possess more than five thousand manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament in the Greek language. In addition, there are an additional fifteen thousand manuscripts in other languages from the first few centuries of this era. No other important text, whether historical or religious, has more than a few dozen copies that have survived until our generation" (The Signature of God, 1996, p. 88).

From the private letters of the apostles' time we find their introduction typically included the identity of the author, the name of the recipient, a prayer for the recipient and a greeting. The conclusion of such letters reflects the apostles' similar style of identifying the recipients, offering thanks and ending with a blessing. "The power of the Epistles," says The Bible Through the Ages, "especially those of Paul, lay partly in their adherence to a structure recognized by educated people throughout the Greek-speaking world" (1996, p. 148).

Let's see a few specific examples of how these letters fit into the context of those days.

Paul's letter to the Romans

Throughout his letter to the Romans we see Paul urging gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome to reconcile their differences. What historical event could have led to disunity that would prompt this kind of admonition?

Paul mentions in this letter that he would send it from one of the ports of Corinth, called Cenchrea, by way of a member named Phoebe (Romans 16:1).

In his first visit to Corinth a few years earlier, Paul had met the married couple Priscilla and Aquila, converted Jews who had been among those expelled from Rome. We read in Acts 18:2 that the Jews at Rome had been exiled by Emperor Claudius around 49 B.C.

After Claudius died, Priscilla and Aquila returned to Rome (Romans 16:3).

The content of the epistle to the Romans reflects the new situation of the return of the Jewish Christians to the Roman church and the need for the gentile Christians again to accept their leadership.

Another indication of the authenticity of the epistle is the mention by Paul of 26 people in Romans 16. Scholars note these names were quite common during that period. Surprisingly, 13 of them have been found in inscriptions or documents connected with the emperor's palace in Rome.

William Barclay notes that, "although many are common names, this fact [their relationship with Caesar's palace] is nonetheless suggestive. In Philippians 4:22, Paul speaks of the saints of Caesar's household. It may be that they were for the most part slaves, but it is still important that Christianity seems to have penetrated early into the imperial palace" (Daily Study Bible, comments on Romans 16:5-11, Bible Explorer software).

Thus this mention of Roman, Greek and Hebrew names common in those days and the historical evidence of a Christian presence even in Caesar's household give credence to what Paul writes in Romans.

The letters to the Corinthians

Paul's two epistles to the Corinthians also fit well with archaeologists' discoveries about Corinth and what we learn from classical Greek literature.

Unlike Paul's letters to people in other areas, in both of the letters to Corinth he refers to sins involving sexual immorality.

Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 that the brethren were openly tolerating a member involved in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Paul instructs the members there to put that person out of the church until he repents and then warns them not to become corrupted by this bad example or allow themselves to return to their former sins.

He admonishes: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Of all the Greek cities, Corinth was the one most known for sexual immorality. "The ancient city had a reputation for vulgar materialism," notes The Bible Knowledge Commentary. "In the earliest Greek literature it was linked with wealth and immorality. When Plato referred to a prostitute, he used the expression 'Corinthian girl.' According to Strabo, the Greek geographer, much of the wealth and vice in Corinth centered around the temple of Aphrodite and its thousand temple prostitutes. For this reason a proverb warned, 'Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth!'" (Logos Library System software, 1985, introduction to 1 Corinthians).

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and other temples dedicated to fertility cults that contributed to the city's rampant immorality. They have also found ruins of the marketplace that indicate that wine was a popular product. "Around the market were a good many shops, numbers of which had individual wells, suggesting that much wine was made and drunk in the city. [Paul warned] in 1 Cor[inthians] 6:10 that drunkards will not 'inherit' the kingdom of God" (Harold Mare, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, 1979, p. 177).

The incident of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church appears to have a positive ending. After the members there repented of their moral laxity, they obeyed Paul and put the guilty party out of the congregation. But in 2 Corinthians 2:3-11 Paul tells them he heard of the sinner's repentance and urged them to forgive and restore him as a member.

Paul's other epistles and those the other apostles wrote all reflect the aspects of everyday life in the Greco-Roman world of that age. Although critical scholars have focussed intensely on the apostolic epistles to try to find any discrepancy or anachronism, none has been forthcoming.

The epistle of James

Of all the epistles, James' is the most practical and picturesque. The Bible Knowledge Commentary calls it "a literary masterpiece ... that combines the rhythmic beauty of Greek with the stern intensity of Hebrew" and says that, "in fact, the Book of James probably has more

figures of speech, analogies, and imagery from nature than all Paul's epistles together" (Logos Library System software, 1985, introduction to James).

How could Jesus' half brother (Matthew 13:55) have developed such a polished literary style? One commentary says about him: "The author had been from fifteen to twenty years a member, and for a number of years, the official head, of the Jerusalem Church, which very early in its history had more Hellenists than Hebrews in its membership. In daily contact with such Hellenists, James could, in the course of the years, have attained to considerable proficiency the use of the Greek tongue" (The New International Commentary of the New Testament: James, 1974, p. 19).

Another evidence of the authenticity of the letter is the mention of Christians still meeting in synagogues. James writes of different classes of people coming "into your assembly" (James 2:2). The Greek word translated "assembly" here is sunagoge, an assembly of people. It was natural for James, as leader of the church in Jerusalem, to refer to the meeting places where Christians gathered as synagogues, since the term did not have the negative connotation it later took among anti-Jewish groups.

"There is evidence that early Jewish Christians sometimes met in synagogues," says archaeologist John McRay. "The New Testament letter of James refers to Christians (undoubtedly Jewish) meeting in a synagogue (2:2), but bear in mind that at this time Jews probably met most often in homes and rented halls" (Archaeology and the New Testament, 1997, p. 72).

Peter's epistles

Peter's writing style and the background of his two epistles also conform to the norm for those times. The Expositor's Bible Commentary states, "First Peter is an epistle or letter written in the normal letter form of the [New Testament] world" (Edwin Blum, 1981, p. 213).

But how could Peter, a Galilean fisherman, write in the fine Greek style of these epistles?

"The parallels between this first letter and Peter's sermons recorded in Acts are significant," answers The Bible Knowledge Commentary. "Peter's public ministry spanned more than 30 years ... He lived and preached in a multicultural world.

It is reasonable to believe that after three decades Peter could have mastered the language of the majority of those to whom he ministered. Certainly Peter had the time and talent to become an outstanding communicator of the gospel via the Greek language" (Logos Library System software, introduction to 1 Peter).

Peter ends his first epistle with a reference to his location: "She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son" (1 Peter 5:13).

Some commentators regard the mention of Babylon as a cryptic way of referring to Rome, but the historical evidence shows that the actual city of Babylon had a thriving Jewish community during those days.

The Scriptures indicate most of Peter's mission dealt not with gentiles but with Jews. Paul

mentioned that "the gospel for the uncircumcised [gentiles] had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised [Jews] was to Peter" (Galatians 2:7).

"Many have wondered," writes historian William McBirnie, "if this [reference to Babylon] did not mean Rome, which was frequently called 'Babylon' by the early Christians. The actual city of Babylon, however, still was of importance. It was a great center of Jewish colonists and was a powerful center when Peter ministered there for a time. The Eastern churches trace their lineage to Babylon, and hence to Peter, to this day" (The Search for the Twelve Apostles, 1973, p. 57).

John's writings

John's Gospel and epistles have an unusual style and are among the most respected by scholars.

"No two works in the whole range of literature," wrote Sir William Ramsay, "show clearer signs of the genius of one writer, and no other pair of works are so completely in a class by themselves, apart from the work of their own and every other time" (Alexander Ross, The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Epistles of James and John, 1974, p. 110).

John penned his epistles toward the end of the New Testament period. They reflect the later struggles of the remaining apostles against gnostic groups and other opponents of God's law (antinomians) who were influencing Church members and seducing many away from the truth. Archaeology has helped us better understand some of the issues that John faced.

"The extensive Gnostic library that was found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945," states John McRay, "has provided us with new information regarding heresy in the early church and about the nature of the canon of the New Testament at this time" (p. 18).

Thanks to the discovery of material documenting some of the gnostic beliefs, the issues John mentioned have been confirmed to be historical.

Conclusion

This concludes the brief overview of what archaeology and history tell us about the apostolic epistles.

Grant Jeffrey sums up the historical findings: "The tremendous advances in historical research and biblical archaeology in the last century have convinced most scholars in the last two decades that the Gospels and Epistles were written within thirty-five years or less of the events which they describe ... In an article for Christianity Today, Jan. 18, 1963, W.F. Albright [the so-called dean of modern archaeology] wrote: 'In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and eighties of the first century A.D.'" (pp. 86-87).

In the next chapter we will conclude this archaeological survey by covering the last book of the

Bible, Revelation.

The Book of Revelation: History and Prophecy

In "The Bible and Archaeology," we have gone through the Scriptures from Genesis through the Epistles reviewing many of the surprising archaeological finds that confirm and illuminate the biblical record. We conclude with a look at archaeological and historical evidence relating to the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

Many people view Revelation, sometimes called the Apocalypse, as a mysterious book of strange symbols and images. Yet it has a clear and definite historical background. The apostle John, who wrote it under the inspiration of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1), mentions where it was written and that it was addressed to congregations in seven cities in Asia Minor.

How do the descriptions of these places compare with discoveries about them from history and archaeology?

Exiled to Patmos

We learn from John that he wrote Revelation from the island of Patmos (verse 9), in the Aegean Sea 40 miles off the coast of Asia Minor (modern- day Turkey). Patmos is a small island of only 24 square miles (62 square kilometers), with a coastline in the shape of a horseshoe.

Was it customary in the Roman Empire for convicts to be exiled to an island? The Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 56-120), in his book Annals, mentions the policy of banishing political prisoners to small islands (Sections 3:68; 4:30; 15:71).

Patmos, a rocky, volcanic and sparsely populated isle, was an appropriate place to send captives. Banishment was a terrible punishment that often involved whippings and being bound in chains before the prisoner was sent off for years of hard labor in rock quarries. At John's advanced age it would have been a harrowing ordeal. Yet he mentions it as an honor to participate "in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" (verse 9).

During the time of John's exile, traditionally 94-96, history records violent persecution against Christians under the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96). This despot declared himself a god and demanded the worship of his subjects– with the exception of Jews. This meant that once a year each head of household had to appear before authorities, burn incense to the emperor and declare, "Caesar is lord." Those who refused were branded as traitors and either sentenced to death or exiled.

Since Christians confessed they had only one Lord, Jesus Christ, they were mercilessly hounded. John, the last living apostle of the original 12, apparently was banished for this reason.

A message to seven churches

While on Patmos, John received a long and complicated vision from Jesus Christ (verses 1-2,

10-20) with the instructions: ". . . What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea" (verse 11).

How accurate are the descriptions of these seven cities mentioned in the book of Revelation according to archaeology and history? Interestingly, Jesus used some of the characteristics of each city to spiritually evaluate its congregation and to prophesy the history of His Church up to His second coming.

The first church: Ephesus

The port city of Ephesus was a short voyage from Patmos. Therefore one could logically send a letter there and then on to the remaining six cities Christ mentioned.

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the Roman roads that stretched from Ephesus to Laodicea. "It is no accident," notes John McRay, "that the letters in Revelation 1-3 are arranged in this same sequence. Beginning with Ephesus, the roads follow a geographic semicircle, extending northward, turning to the east, and continuing southward to Laodicea—thus connecting the cities on what must have functioned as an ancient postal route" (Archaeology and the New Testament, 1997, p. 242).

The apostle Paul had founded a large church in Ephesus, and now Jesus addressed the members there with a prophetic message that applied to them and was predictive of the Church's future. Jesus had told John: "Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are [at the present time], and the things which will take place after this [in the future]" (verse 19, emphasis added throughout). Hence part of the message of Revelation would apply to John's time, and part would be for future generations.

Christ recognizes the effort of the Ephesian brethren, in spite of many obstacles, to keep the faith and carry out the commission He had given them. "I know your works, your labor, your patience," He told them, "and that you cannot bear those who are evil" (Revelation 2:2).

In Ephesus was much evil to avoid— within and without the congregation. It was there that Paul had warned the "elders of the church" (Acts 20:17): "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (verses 29-30).

Moreover, the Ephesian brethren had to resist the many temptations the immensely popular pagan temple worship offered them. Archaeologists have found at Ephesus the ruins of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Diana, or Artemis, also mentioned in the Bible (Acts 19:27). Thousands of priests and priestesses served the temple; many of the priestesses were dedicated to cultic prostitution.

Centuries earlier Heracleitus, an Ephesian philosopher, described the inhabitants there as "fit only to be drowned[,] and the reason why [they] could never laugh or smile was because [they] lived amidst such terrible uncleanness." Such was the reputation of ancient Ephesus. It would have been difficult to live as a Christian in the midst of such an immoral city.

Knowing this, Christ gives the brethren the hope that if they persevere in the faith they will receive something that all the temple worship of Diana could never give them—the gift of eternal life. "To him who overcomes," He promised, "I will give to eat from the tree of life [symbolizing eternal life], which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7).

Smyrna: Center of emperor worship

The next city on the ancient postal circuit was Smyrna, about 40 miles north of Ephesus. It was a flourishing city and the main center of emperor worship.

Jesus tells the church in Smyrna: "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days" (verse 10).

These words had not only a prophetic sense but a literal fulfillment in John's day as well. The brethren in Smyrna knew they were special targets of the persecution under Domitian, for the city's history had shown an unwavering loyalty to Rome. It was proud that it had been declared a "free city," which meant its residents had the right to govern their own affairs.

"Long before Rome was undisputed mistress of the world," comments William Barclay, "Smyrna had cast in its lot with her, never to waver in its fidelity. Cicero [the Roman orator] called Smyrna 'one of our most faithful and most ancient allies' . . . Such was the reverence of Smyrna for Rome that as far back as 195 B.C. it was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma" (Letters to the Seven Churches, 1957, p. 29).

The only way Church members could go about peacefully in this place was to carry a certificate showing they had offered incense to the emperor and proclaimed him lord. Among the ancient papyri letters that archaeologists have found is one with such a request and another with an accompanying certificate declaring: "We, the representatives of the Emperor, Serenos and Hermas, have seen you sacrificing."

Many of the Christians in Smyrna would die because of fierce persecutions. So Christ encourages and reminds them that He is offering them something Caesar worship could never provide—the chance to live forever. He exhorts them: "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (verse 11).

Pergamos: "Where Satan's throne is"

Next on the Roman mail route was Pergamos, the Roman capital of Asia Minor. This city would never reach the commercial greatness of Ephesus or Smyrna, but it was the indisputable center of religious, medical and artistic culture of the region. The city's famous library, with 200,000 parchment rolls, was rivaled only by the library in Alexandria, Egypt.

Christ tells the church at Pergamos: "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (verse 13). Again, this prophecy had a literal fulfillment as well as serving as a description of a future time for the Church.

The mention of Satan's throne in Pergamos likely refers to the famous worship of its most popular deity, the serpent god Asklepios Soter, whose Latin equivalent means "the man-instructing serpent and savior." The serpent god was none other than Satan, whom Revelation describes as "that serpent of old, called the Devil" (Revelation 12:9).

Pergamos was so renowned for the worship of this god, who supposedly healed the sick, that this deity was called "the Pergamene god." Many of the coins discovered in Pergamos have the serpent as part of their design.

The remains of the shrine to Asklepios have been uncovered by archaeologists. "A 450-foot segment of the widest section was excavated and reconstructed so visitors to the site can experience a beautiful approach to the Asklepieion," notes John McRay. "Dedicated to Asklepios Soter, the god of healing, the Asklepieion was a kind of Mayo Clinic of the ancient world . . . Numerous treatment rooms, sleeping rooms (for incubation and autosuggestion in psychiatric treatment), meeting rooms, and temples were located here . . . Patients coming to the shrine believed that Asklepios would heal them. There was no perceived dissonance between science and religion in the ancient world" (McRay, pp. 271-272).

"From all over the world," adds William Barclay, "people flocked to Pergamos for relief of their sicknesses. R.H. Charles has called Pergamos 'the Lourdes of the ancient world' . . . Thus, pagan religion had its center in Pergamos. There was the worship of Athene and Zeus, with its magnificent altar dominating the city [now partially reconstructed in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin]. There was the worship of Asklepios, bringing sick people from far and near, and above all there were the demands of Caesar worship, hanging forever like a poised sword above the heads of the Christians" (The Daily Study Bible, notes on Revelation 2:12-17, Bible Explorer Software).

Origin of serpent worship in Pergamos

How did serpent worship begin in Pergamos? Some historians trace it to the collapse of the Babylonian Empire, when some Chaldean priests established their religious center in Pergamos. "The defeated Chaldeans fled to Asia Minor, and fixed their central college at Pergamos," notes historian William Barker in his book Lares and Penates of Cilicia (1853, p. 232).

Certainly the Old Testament identifies Satan's chief seat of activity as being in ancient Babylon, where the doctrines of its mystery religion "made all the earth drunk" (Jeremiah 51:7). This would make its religious successor, Pergamos, the temporary new "Satan's seat" of the Babylonian mystery religion.

"That seat," comments Alexander Hislop, "after the death of Belshazzar [the last Babylonian king], and the expulsion of the Chaldean priesthood from Babylon by the Medo-Persian kings, was at Pergamos, where afterwards was one of the seven churches of Asia. There, in consequence, for many centuries was 'Satan's seat.'

"There, under favor of the deified kings of Pergamos, was his favorite abode and was the worship of Asklepios, under the form of the serpent . . . Pergamos itself became part and parcel of the Roman Empire, when Attalus III, the last of its kings, at his death, left by will all his

dominions to the Roman people in 133 BC" (The Two Babylons, 1959, p. 240).

In this way, the Roman emperors had become the heirs of "Satan's seat" during John's day. Later, when the Roman Empire collapsed, its successor, the Holy Roman Empire, would inherit the role. It is noteworthy that Revelation 17:4-5, 18 reveals that in the end time a powerful religious system from the ancient past will again reign over the nations and be identified as "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth."

Pressure to compromise in Thyatira

Some 40 miles east of Pergamos lay Thyatira, a city important for its commerce in wool and textiles.

When the city was excavated from 1968 to 1971, its architectural remains showed it had the typical Roman style of colonnades and public buildings and a temple to the goddess Artemis. The city was especially famous for its fine woolen cloth, usually dyed in a shade that came to be called Thyatiran purple. It was from Thyatira that Lydia, a seller of purple and convert to Christianity, had come (Acts 16:14). Inscriptions at the site reveal the existence of trade guilds, many of them associated with the powerful textile industry.

Christ says about this congregation: "I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (Revelation 2:19-20).

Since Thyatira was a religious center, and the home of powerful guilds demanding religious participation of their workers in their banquets, it was difficult for Christians to resist falling into idolatry.

"The strong trade guilds in this city," says Leon Morris, "would have made it very difficult for any Christian to earn his living without belonging to a guild. But membership involved attendance at guild banquets, and this in turn meant eating meat which had first been sacrificed to an idol. What was a Christian to do? If he did not conform he was out of a job . . .

"The teaching of Jezebel [probably a symbolic name] apparently reasoned that an idol is of no consequence, and advised Christians to eat such meals. That these meals all too readily degenerated into sexual looseness made matters worse. But we can understand that some Christians would welcome a heresy of this type. It enabled them to maintain a Christian profession while countenancing and even engaging in immoral heathen revels" (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 1975, p. 71).

Christ reminds the Thyatiran brethren they must come out of that worldly society, no matter how enticing it appeared, and not compromise with the truth. He promises to those of Thyatira who remain faithful that they will be arrayed, not in Thyatiran purple, a cloth used mainly by Roman royalty, but at His coming with the spiritual mantle of rulership over the nations.

He tells them that "he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—'He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like

the potter's vessels'—as I also have received from My Father" (Revelation 2:26-27).

Sardis: Warning to watch

Poised above the rich Hermus Valley, Sardis was 30 miles south of Thyatira. The city appeared as a gigantic watchtower and was considered impregnable. Five roads converged below it and contributed to Sardis's status as a great commercial center. The wealth of the city—which had been the capital of the Lydian Empire under the opulent King Croesus—was legendary.

Christ exhorts this church, "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God" (Revelation 3:2).

The Sardian brethren could readily identify with a warning to be watchful. The only two times Sardis had been conquered were when its citizens had become overconfident and failed to watch.

Once, when King Cyrus of Persia besieged the city, the Sardians, nestled in their fortress high above, paid little attention to the invader. Cyrus could not find a way to get up to the citadel and even offered a reward to the soldier who discovered a pathway. Sometime later a vigilant Persian soldier spied a defender who had accidentally dropped his helmet from above. The careless soldier climbed down a secret pathway to retrieve it, and that night the Persians led their troops up the same pathway and to the top. To their surprise, the site was completely unguarded. The watchmen had gone home to sleep, thinking there was no need to keep guard at night—and so Sardis fell.

Incredibly, several centuries later the same sequence of events occurred when a Greek general besieged the city. After a year's siege the Greeks appeared to lose all hope of conquering the city. Then one of the Sardian soldiers dropped a helmet and retrieved it. That night the Greeks led some men up the steep cliff. When they reached the top, the place was again unguarded. Sardis's inhabitants had forgotten their lesson, and their city fell again.

Christ uses this lesson to drive home a powerful spiritual point to His Church: "Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you" (verse 3).

Faithfulness in Philadelphia

About 25 miles southeast of Sardis lay the city of Philadelphia, newest of the seven cities. An imperial road passed through it from Rome to the east, so it became known as "the gateway to the East."

Christ says to this church: "These things says He who is holy, He who is true . . . Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more" (Revelation 3:7, 11-12).

Christ emphasizes His loyalty to His true followers and reminds them to be equally faithful to

Him. If they persevere in His Word, He will give them a crown that they may rule with Him in His Kingdom.

We find a definite theme of brotherly fidelity in this section. The Philadelphian brethren could well identify with this admonition.

Philadelphia means "brotherly love." The city was named after the love the king who founded the city held for his brother. The city was established by Attalus II (159138 B.C.), who was called Philadelphus ("brother lover") in honor of his loyal affection toward his brother, King Eumenes II of Pergamos. During his brother's lifetime Attalus II was his most loyal assistant. He successfully commanded his brother's forces in several wars and later became the trusted ambassador to their ally, Rome. There he won respect and admiration from the Romans for his brotherly fidelity.

The New Bible Dictionary comments: "As Philadelphus was renowned for his loyalty to his brother, so the church, the true Philadelphia, inherits and fulfills his character by its steadfast loyalty to Christ" (1982, "Philadelphia," p. 926).

Laodicea: Warning to repent

The last city on the route was Laodicea, 45 miles southeast of Philadelphia. With three main roads crossing it, the city was one of the richest commercial centers in the world. The Laodiceans were famous for producing shiny, black wool clothing and boasted of an outstanding medical center that specialized in eye ointments. With the wealth amassed, it had also become the banking center of the region.

Christ says to this church: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" (verses 15-18).

Archaeologists have discovered the main aqueduct going to Laodicea, and several miles of it can still be traced. The water piped in from the south had so many minerals that the Roman engineers had covers installed so they could remove the mineral deposits before the pipes clogged.

"For all its wealth, the city had poor water," says The Expositor's Bible Commentary. "The water either came from the nearby hot springs and was cooled to lukewarm or came from a cooler source and warmed up in the aqueduct on the way" (notes on Revelation 3, Zondervan software).

Christ uses the Laodiceans'lukewarm and distasteful water to point out that their poor spiritual state is equally offensive to Him. He warns them that, if they do not rapidly improve their spiritual condition, He will reject them. He detests the Laodicean attitude of compromising with God's laws. By contrast, He later describes those who are faithful to Him as "those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

Further, even if their clothing were world renowned, Christ tells them their "spiritual garments" were in pitiful condition. He recommends they focus instead on buying from Him the spiritual clothing of true righteousness that He later describes as "fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Revelation 19:8).

Jesus next tells those brethren, who were blind to their true spiritual condition, that the "Phrygian powder" concocted in their medical center as an eye ointment was useless. Instead, He advised them to use His true spiritual eye salve so they can clearly see and repent of their compromising attitudes.

Lastly, Christ warns them not to put their trust in their physical wealth but in Him, who can develop the true gold that comes from overcoming trials and building righteous spiritual character. This solid advice is of lasting value to the entirety of the Church at any time in its history.

Conclusion

This concludes our archaeological review of the last book of the Bible. We hope this series has been a satisfying journey through the Bible and that it has strengthened your faith.

Throughout these chapers we have confirmed what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."