The Stones Cry Out and Confirm Bible History!

Disbelieving critics have challenged the accuracy of Bible history at every turn—and have lost!

For centuries the Bible was accepted throughout the Western world as an accurate history of ancient times. It was considered to be literally true and authentic in every detail.

The events in the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the building of the Tower of Babel, the deeds of the patriarchs, the Exodus from Egypt—all were believed to have occurred exactly as recounted in Scripture.

But then came the so-called "Enlightenment" or Age of Reason of the 17th and 18th centuries. European intellectuals began to claim that only through human, "scientific" reasoning could true knowledge be acquired.

Scriptural revelation came under direct attack!

On its heels arose the 19th-century theory of evolution, offering an alternative explanation to divine creation for the presence of life on earth. God and the Bible were completely excluded from the picture.

Soon many scholars began to totally dismiss Scripture as unhistorical, with no reliable basis in fact. They began to view biblical history as mere legend, primitive superstition and folklore—placing it in the same category as the ancient Greek and Roman myths.

These scholars claimed that many Old Testament books were not contemporary records at all, but were actually written centuries after the events they described. They declared them to have been based solely on garbled, orally transmitted traditions, later put to paper by ignorant, albeit sincere, men.

Some scholars and "higher critics" came to deny the very existence of such major biblical personalities as Noah, Abraham, Joseph and Moses.

These supposedly learned men were committing the same folly as those Roman scoffers of old, so aptly described by the apostle Paul: "[They] became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:21-22). Like the ancient Roman philosophers, "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge" (verse 28).

Many scholars unfortunately chose to ignore other scholars' dramatic, epoch-making discoveries in the Near East, which were rapidly putting an entirely new light on the biblical record—and showing their modern ideas to be hollow, unfounded rubbish!

The Fertile Crescent

The new science of archaeology—the study of the material remains of man's past—was to severely shake the confident anti-God prejudice of critical "scholarship."

For centuries, looters and religious pilgrims had unearthed and carried away multiple thousands of ancient artifacts from sites throughout the Near East. But few understood the real significance of these items.

Shortly after the year 1800, systematic study and evaluation of Near Eastern sites began. Archaeology enjoyed a steady and rapid growth. For well over a century and a half now, the region of the Fertile Crescent has been the object of intense archaeological scrutiny.

The term *Fertile Crescent* was coined by Egyptologist James Henry Breasted for the area where civilization began—a crescent-shaped region of rich, well-watered land extending from the Persian Gulf up the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, then westward over Syria and southward along the Mediterranean through Palestine. Egypt's fertile Nile Valley is sometimes included within its boundaries.

It was in the Fertile Crescent that the lands and peoples that figure so prominently in Old Testament history were found. It is not surprising, therefore, that there has been relatively strong public interest in the findings uncovered by the spade of the archaeologist in this region.

It is also not surprising that these discoveries have caused disbelieving scholars to sit up and take notice. In fact, the spectacular archaeological finds of the past century and a half by sound-minded men of learning have prompted a radical reevaluation by scholars of the Bible's reliability as a historical document!

Critics eat crow

Modern archaeology has provided solid extrabiblical corroboration of historical facts otherwise known to us only from Scripture. It has proved beyond all reasonable doubt the accuracy of the Bible as a historical document.

Even still, it should come as no surprise that some scholars remain determined to discredit the Bible as a divinely inspired historical record, stubbornly overlooking the overwhelming array of proof and documentation. Carnal man is disinclined to accept and submit to God's Word.

These critics will blithely gloss over mounds of facts and plain evidence rather than accept the Bible for what it is. Some few have even chosen to pervert and twist the clear testimony of archaeology to suit their own purposes—deliberately misinterpreting and misrepresenting the facts rather than concede the authenticity of Scripture!

Nevertheless, the past 150 years have witnessed remarkable archaeological confirmation of the Old Testament.

Key discovery

Let us briefly examine a few of the scores of archaeological discoveries that bear upon the history of biblical times—finds that have provided dramatic corroboration of the millennia-old Bible record.

Not all archaeological finds have been as highly publicized over the decades as the spectacular discovery in 1922 of the tomb of Tutankhamen in Egypt by Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon. Yet many less-heralded finds have proved infinitely more important to the evaluation of the Bible record.

Without question the most vital of these early discoveries was the unlocking of the secret of Behistun Rock. This momentous breakthrough in the last century opened wide the door to further inquiry, which has since confirmed and reconfirmed Bible history many times over.

Located on a cliff on Behistun Mountain at the foot of the Zagros Range in Persia is a smoothed rock surface with ancient cuneiform carvings in three languages—Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian. Cuneiform was a mode of writing, employing wedge-shaped marks, used by many of the ancient peoples of western Asia.

The Behistun Inscription, dating from 516 B.C., is an account of the assumption of the Persian throne by Darius the Great (550-486). Beginning in 1835, Sir Henry C. Rawlinson, an officer in the British East India Company, painstakingly copied the three inscriptions from the rock face. He then set to work unlocking their secrets. By 1846 he had deciphered the Persian part of the inscription. As a result of this achievement, he and other scholars were able to translate the Babylonian and Elamite portions soon afterwards.

The trilingual Behistun Inscription thus proved to be the vital key to ancient cuneiform writing—just as the famous Rosetta Stone had unlocked the mysteries of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. The writings unearthed at hundreds of sites throughout the Near East could now be understood!

Excavation, however, is slow, painstaking work. A single site may be worked for a decade or

more. Subsequent analysis of finds can take even longer. For this reason, Mr. Rawlinson's success did not have an immediate impact on biblical studies. Translation of previously unearthed cuneiform tablets—as well as those uncovered later—was a prolonged and time-consuming task. But gradually—year by year, decade by decade—a clear picture began to emerge.

The "mythical" Hittites

Bible critics had long scoffed at references in the biblical record to a people called the Hittites (Gen. 15:20, Ex. 3:8, 17, Num. 13:29, Josh. 1:4, Judg. 1:26 and elsewhere). Their evaluation was that the Hittites were simply "one of the many mythical peoples" fabricated by Bible writers—or, at best, a small and unimportant tribe.

But the critics were wrong!

In the latter half of the 19th century, Hittite monuments were discovered at Carchemish on the Euphrates River in Syria, amply vindicating the Bible narrative. Later, in 1906, excavations at Boghazkoy (ancient Hattusas, capital of the Hittite empire) in Turkey uncovered thousands of Hittite documents, revealing a wealth of information about Hittite history and culture.

The Hittites, it is now known, were a very real and formidable power. They were once one of the dominant peoples of Asia Minor and the Near East, at times exercising control over Syria and parts of Palestine.

The Bible had been correct after all! Today, books abound on the history, art, culture and society of the Hittites—a strong witness by competent scholars against those critics who had once been so quick to challenge the Word of God!

Moses illiterate?

Many critics had also long ridiculed the idea that writing had been in existence in the days of Moses. Writing was unknown at that time, they asserted, implying that the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) could not possibly have been recorded by Moses or his near contemporaries, but rather were oral traditions recorded at a much later time.

With the flowering of Near Eastern archaeology, however, came overwhelming proof that writing was in common use for centuries before the time of Moses! In both Egypt and Mesopotamia multiple thousands of inscriptions have been uncovered, unquestionably antedating Moses by many hundreds of years.

Moreover, pre-Flood (Early Bronze) inscriptions and writings abound, now known to antedate by many generations the Noachian Deluge of the 24th century B.C. The 17,000 cuneiform tablets and fragments of tablets unearthed by Italian archaeologists in 1974 and thereafter at the site of ancient Ebla in northern Syria exemplify the plethora of pre-Flood and post-Flood writings.

Another Jewish "myth"?

Some critics had also disputed the historicity of the Babylonian captivity. The Bible recounts, in great detail, the carrying away into slavery of the nation of Judah by the armies of Babylon early in the 6th century B.C. (II Kings 24-25). "Another Jewish myth" was their scholarly consensus.

In 1935 to 1938, however, an important discovery was made at a site thought to be ancient Lachish, 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Lachish was one of the cities recorded in the Bible as having been besieged by the king of Babylon at the same time as the siege of Jerusalem (Jer. 34:7).

Twenty-one pottery fragments inscribed in the ancient Hebrew script were unearthed in the latest preexilic levels of the site. Commonly called the Lachish Letters or Lachish Ostraca, they were written during the very time of the Babylonian siege. Some of them proved to be communiques exchanged between the city's military commander and the commander of an outlying observation post, vividly picturing the final days of Judah's desperate struggle against Babylon!

Subsequent finds in Mesopotamia of Babylonian historical texts describing the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar have provided additional proof. The historical fact of the Babylonian captivity has been firmly established.

Dead Sea Scrolls

Probably one of the most spectacular finds in Near Eastern archaeology of the present century was that of the famed Dead Sea Scrolls. These tattered manuscripts were first discovered by a

Bedouin shepherd boy in 1947 in desert caves in the Judean wilderness near the Dead Sea. Subsequently, additional scrolls were uncovered at various locations in the region.

The majority of the manuscripts were composed between 100 B.C. and A.D. 68. Some of them contain the oldest-known versions of passages and books from the Old Testament—including the entire book of Isaiah. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest and fullest manuscript in Hebrew was the Codex Petropolitanus dating from A.D. 916.

It has been thought that the scrolls had been part of a library belonging to the Essenes. The manuscripts evidence occasional spurious textual readings, additions, deletions and careless copying mistakes. As Jesus stated (Matt. 23:2), the scribes and Pharisees, not the Qumran sect, sat in Moses' seat and had authority over the preservation of the original inspired Hebrew text.

Nevertheless, the Dead Sea Scrolls lend support to the high degree of accuracy in the transmission of the Old Testament text. The 2,000-year-old documents demonstrate clearly that the authoritative Masoretic Hebrew Old Testament as we have it today is remarkably faithful to the ancient texts.

Also noteworthy in this regard are fragments of 14 parchment scrolls—including parts of the books of Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms and Ezekiel—discovered at Masada, the site of the Jews' last stand against the Romans in A.D. 73. In text and spelling they are identical with the traditional Hebrew Bible.

Noah's Flood—fact or fable?

Many efforts have been made to establish the historicity of the Flood or Noachian Deluge (Gen. 5-8) by archaeological means. The Flood account has probably been one of the most assailed of all biblical narratives.

Though many critics continue to relegate the story to the realm of myth, this is more a result of their refusal to accept the possibility of divine intervention in history than of any lack of evidence.

Thick layers of silt and clay found in numerous Babylonian excavations were unquestionably deposited by flood waters. In some cases, these layers of sediment—with the ruins of earlier cities buried beneath them—correspond to the time of the Flood as demanded by biblical chronology. Many authorities thus consider them to be aqueous deposits laid down by Noah's Flood in the 24th century B.C. Critics, on the other hand, claim "coincidence."

At other sites, critics are quick to point out, sediment layers have been found dating from time periods other than the 24th century. And at some sites there is a total absence of flood deposits at levels where they should be found were the biblical account true.

What these critics fail to recognize is the simple fact that local variations in terrain would have naturally left differing types and degrees of Flood evidence—or no evidence at all—from one site to another. In addition, localized flooding (of the Euphrates River, for example) at other times in history amply accounts for the sediment found at other levels.

Perhaps even more telling than the study of flood deposits is the testimony of history as reconstructed for the 24th century B.C. Terms and phrases such as *anarchy, destruction, dark ages, breaks in continuity* and *major population reductions* keep cropping up for this time period—the time of the biblical Deluge!

The break between the Egyptian Old Kingdom and the rise of the Middle Kingdom is one such example, as is the period before the Akkadian Dynasty in southern Mesopotamia (Sumer). The period between the Early Bronze culture and Middle Bronze culture in Palestine bespeaks the same type of interruption. "Civilization suffers an eclipse, history becomes misty and indefinite, literacy almost disappears," summarizes archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon.

What clearer evidence could we require for the cataclysmic disruption the Bible describes?

Finally, we should note that ancient Flood stories are found in widespread areas of the globe—including America, Britain, India, China, Tibet, Kashmir, Polynesia, Greece and Australia. Almost all races have a tradition of a major catastrophe very similar in detail to the Genesis account! The Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*—an ancient flood story on a series of clay tablets from the library of King Ashurbanipal of Nineveh—is one of the best known. Since all races descended from the sons of Noah, it should come as no sur-

prise that they handed the same story down to their children.

More proof

Other important corroborative discoveries can be briefly mentioned:

• Many critics had scoffed at the assertion that Joseph shaved before being presented to Pharaoh (Gen. 41:14). They asserted that the razor was not known in Egypt until many centuries later. But, as usual, archaeology uncovered proof to the contrary, demonstrating that razors were known in Egypt long before the time of Joseph (the 17th century B.C.). Solid gold and copper razors have been found in Egyptian tombs dating as early as the fourth millennium B.C.

• At one time the 39 kings of ancient Israel and Judah during the period of the divided monarchy were known only from the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles. Some critics again charged fabrication. But then emerged a large number of cuneiform records from the excavated libraries of numerous Assyrian kings, mentioning many of the kings of Israel and Judah including Omri, Ahab, Jehu, Menahem, Hoshea, Pekah, Hezekiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoram and Jehoshaphat. The biblical record was again proved correct.

• The biblical account of the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn on the night before the Exodus is well known to even the casual student of the Bible. Scripture states, "It came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon" (Ex. 12:29).

Archaeology has revealed that Thutmose IV—successor to Amenhotep (Amenophis) II, pharaoh of the Exodus—was *not* Amenhotep's firstborn nor the heir apparent. He rather succeeded to the throne after his *elder brother's death*—just as required by the biblical account.

• The campaign of Sennacherib of Assyria against Judah is recorded in II Kings 18-19 and II Chronicles 32. The biblical account states that he besieged Jerusalem, but returned without taking the city after his army was miraculously destroyed. Sennacherib's own account of the invasion has been found on a clay prism. Though he boasts of numerous other victories, he does not claim to have captured Jerusalem. Again, the Bible has been confirmed.

Unerring accuracy

Literally scores of additional discoveries of archaeology could be cited as corroboration of Bible history. Examples of archaeological illustration of the Old Testament are continually increasing as new discoveries are being made.

The claims of disbelieving critics have been completely exploded. Archaeology has abundantly confirmed Bible history many times over. The clear message is that we can rely on the Bible record. It is consistently historical in every detail.

The Bible challenges disbelieving critics to prove it false. Many have tried desperately to do so—and failed. God's Word cannot be broken (John 10:35)!

The Bible is not the work of fallible man. It is not a book of ancient fables. It is truly the infallible Word of God! "Thy word is truth," Jesus declared in John 17:17. Archaeology has lent its voice in support of this unassailable fact! □

Scattered stones and mosaics on the site of Capernaum echo Christ's prediction that the once-bustling international city would fall into insignificance (page 22); a mud-brick city gate, built about the time of Abraham in the wall of the city that later became known as Dan (page 23); a second-century represenation of the ark of the covenant, from a synagogue at Capernaum (page 24); at Jerusalem, the Omayyad Palace with older Byzantine building in the foreground and, in the background, a wall built by the Crusaders (page 25); and the Jerusalem diggings near the ancient City of David, with the dome of the Al Aksa Mosque in the background (this page).