

## **A Vision for Archaeology and Faith**

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Had I been born a few centuries ago, I would have been a beggar or a jeweler—most likely the former. I was very nearsighted, which oddly wasn't diagnosed until I was six years old, but eyeglasses would dramatically change my view of the world. Suddenly things more than a couple of feet away were clear and sharp! Rather than asking for alms or crafting intricate jewelry, I could now lead a fairly normal life, thanks to my Coke-bottle lenses.

This early limitation, coupled with my personality, fueled an intense interest to see things up close and to figure out how they worked. I remember my father carefully breaking the glass off a 3-way light bulb to show my older brother and me the two filaments inside. The bulb's 50/100/150-Watt brightness depended on whether one or the other or both filaments were lit. It was incredible!

I didn't see well enough to play much with others—aside from my brother—so I spent most of my young days building things with Tinker Toys, an Erector Set, and plastic bricks. I also played with earth-moving toys in our garden.

Fortunately, and probably to keep me out of trouble, my third-grade teacher Miss Bramhall gave me an astronomy project. She asked me to paint the objects in the solar system and she posted them above the classroom chalkboard. Although astronomy pictures at that time were mostly fuzzy black-and-white images of planets and galaxies, the project opened the universe to me and cemented my interest in the sciences. A chemistry set for a Christmas present and my overall passion for anything electrical or electronic also definitely helped.

### **Uneasiness in College**

In college, I followed in my brother's footsteps and declared a physics major, although I also loved chemistry and added that major in my sophomore year. Thankfully, I was good enough at math to manage physics, although I preferred the hands-on experiments over the calculation-heavy theoretical area. Thanks to my extreme nearsightedness, I had no trouble wiring tiny circuit boards and building equipment with small parts.

The complete shift in academic and social worlds that accompanied college life also affected me spiritually. Growing up, my family had attended a small, conservative Presbyterian church and we had a great pastor. I memorized Bible verses and parts of the Westminster

Confession of Faith in catechism class and had been confirmed by the congregation. Christianity seemed reasonable. It had an intellectual foundation and I didn't have any problems "believing" it, but the Christian life just seemed like it was a series of mental boxes to check off. So, in college, religion in general and Christianity in particular just didn't seem to matter. Thankfully, God kept me from doing anything crazy (no frat life) and I focused mainly on academics.

Coming into my junior year, I experienced some strained relationships, including one where my girlfriend dumped me for my roommate. After that punch to the gut, I took the risk of asking the prettiest girl in my biochemistry class if she would be my lab partner. She took the risk of accepting me, and that fall semester we struggled together through a series of hard labs that usually didn't work (this was the first time the course and lab were being taught, and we were the "shakedown" class). We worked well together, but no, we didn't get married later. However, I noticed a difference in her. She was *really* a Christian: patient, graceful under pressure, not anxious or stressed out over failure like everyone else was, including me. I had to ask her: "What do you have that I don't?" Her reply: "You have a Bible, don't you? Go and read it."

So, I did. It wasn't strange material, but now I was seeing something I had missed before. We all seek peace and security, but I was looking for these in all the wrong places: in relationships with other broken people and in material things that wear out or get stolen. Basically, I'd missed the security of a relationship with my Creator by instead focusing only on the things He'd created. Like the woman who'd spent twelve years and all that she had on physicians in the hope of getting healed (Mark 5:25–34), I realized that I needed to reach out and have a relationship with Jesus, not just give mental assent to some details about his life and character.

### **Challenged by My Peers**

But when I started to talk with my friends about a relationship with Jesus, they threw tons of questions at me, like: Hasn't science shown that God doesn't exist? What evidence is there that anything in the Bible could be true?

Growing up I had seen Christianity and science as partners. It seemed clear that the universe had a beginning, that the Genesis narrative had the basic sequence of creation right, and that Scripture described our flawed human condition (I saw Adam and Eve fitting into a God-guided theistic evolutionary framework at the time). I didn't see science as a barrier to faith at all. But my friends' questions were reasonable: Could I trust the Bible itself? What about the details regarding Israel's history and the New Testament accounts of Jesus and the apostles? All their questions boiled down to three points: Did it happen? Was it true? Does it matter?

By this time, I was finishing college and was privileged to be accepted into the graduate

physics program at Cornell University. There, through the “chance” recommendation of a college friend, I connected with a student-centered church that focused on apologetics. This church provided resources to answer not only science-faith questions but also the historical and biblical reliability challenges. In addition to his regular teaching, the pastor recommended a list of “must read” books to address these issues.

I quickly devoured Frank Morison’s classic, *Who Moved the Stone?* Morison set out to disprove the resurrection, but after careful examination of the historical sources, he came to accept its historicity.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, William Ramsay’s *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* reflects the careful work of a skeptical historian who came to accept Luke and Acts as accurate accounts of Jesus’s ministry and the early church.<sup>2</sup> (Both of these books are still in print with updated editions, although Josh and Sean McDowell’s *More than a Carpenter* covers highlights of this material and is more accessible to contemporary, casual readers.)<sup>3</sup>

But Morison and Ramsay appeared to be the exceptions. Most Bible scholars in the academy today remain skeptics. Thus, when I finished my physics degree, I thought it best to go deeper into biblical history myself by attending seminary and then pursuing graduate studies in the Old Testament (OT) because historical questions, in addition to science-related questions, focus much more on OT texts (New Testament issues are comparatively minor).

### **What My Studies Revealed**

When I got into graduate OT work, I encountered a somewhat different approach than what I had found in physics. New data were scarce. You couldn’t easily set up a lab experiment to test something about the text. But more striking to me than the data limitation was the common attitude that almost every statement in the Bible was assumed to be wrong! And what data could counter this skepticism? Only material from outside the Bible, mainly from archaeology. Thus, if I wanted to work on the historical reliability of the Bible, I needed affirmation from extrabiblical sources. So, I changed programs over to ancient Near Eastern (ANE) studies in order to focus on the extrabiblical data that most OT scholars and others judged to be more trustworthy.

But I learned something important about science along the way. At Cornell, it had been drilled into me that as scientists, we were to seek truth, no holds barred. What my thesis advisor or others expected the results to be didn’t matter. The only thing that counted was a well-controlled, unbiased assessment of the data. But in a Hebrew language class when we were studying the Genesis Flood narrative, I was told that “in order to be scientific,” we could not accept the account as historical at all. It’s strange to think that I earned a PhD in physics from an Ivy League University and had never been told that “science can only give naturalistic answers.” This Bible class was my first exposure to this thinking. Had I slept through the Cornell class when this maxim was explained? Perhaps, but scientists rarely study philosophy, and when one’s research focuses on studying material causes for material effects, it’s a quest for truth only. Had I

been working in an origins-related science area where a materialistic (or naturalistic) explanation was presumed before one even considered the data, my experience might have been different. Nevertheless, I was shocked to learn that “science” meant the pursuit of materialistic explanations, not the quest for truth.<sup>4</sup> And since many OT scholars want to be “scientific,” their goal also is to explain away any miracles or special historical events in the Bible as legends or misunderstood natural phenomena. Affirming that they actually might have happened, as Morison and Ramsay had come to believe and argued, was simply unprofessional.

The ancient Near Eastern courses were exciting. They consisted of real artifacts, a range of literary, religious, economic, and administrative texts to decipher and understand, and occasionally new discoveries to wrestle with. ANE studies filled in the cracks for me and provided a cultural setting for the world of the Bible (although the field has grown so large that much of the scholarly work in Assyriology and Egyptology today has no direct bearing on biblical material). Again, I saw the same efforts to “be scientific” and explain away anything miraculous, but I also noticed more openness to accepting at least a historical kernel behind biblical events.

So, did OT and ANE studies help me answer my three big questions regarding Bible history: Did it happen? Was it true? Does it matter? Most definitely! Those studies provided both evidence and the framework to interpret it. Let’s look at three components of the framework first.

### **Materialism Is Pervasive**

Finding truth requires digging through more than data. We all have philosophical assumptions that guide our thinking and incline us to favor some conclusions over others. In our world today, materialism (or naturalism) is the dominant perspective. It’s the water in which we, like fish, swim. Thus, for many people this environment determines the outcome, and the data don’t matter. Realizing the power of this embedded cultural worldview—both inside and outside of the hard sciences—allowed me to see that two people can look at the same facts and come to different conclusions. One can even claim to be following the evidence where it leads but remain unwilling to take the correct path because one has overriding assumptions against it. Thus, any discussion of historical and scientific data must include a conversation over what is an “acceptable” interpretation, and why.

### **Evidence Is Fragmentary**

Scientists can never gather all the data and evidence that we want. In astronomy, for example, we can only sample the electromagnetic (and now gravitational) waves and occasional high-energy

particles that course through the universe and that happen to impinge on the tiny earth. We cannot travel to other stars and galaxies to collect physical samples or climb into a time machine to go back and observe the big bang.

This limitation also applies to ancient history and archaeology. One can only hope to recover a fraction of the original material culture that survived destruction through burning and looting *and* did not decay as it was buried for thousands of years. And of these meager remnants, only a fraction will just happen to be discovered, properly analyzed, and published. This constraint gives the skeptic a huge advantage in biblical questions because we can only hope to recover a tiny bit of the ancient materials that relate to the text. However, since the skeptic has assumed that virtually none of the Bible is true, we can look at the *trend* in the data: Do new discoveries, as rare as they are, tend to confirm the biblical accounts, or undermine them? Thus, archaeology is not able to *prove* the Bible, but it can give us increasing assurance that what is reported there actually happened.

### **Belief Thresholds**

Some Christians seem to think that the more faith they have, the better. I've known skeptics who have said that they wouldn't believe in Jesus unless he appeared to them physically, like he did to Thomas. What is the balance between proof and faith? Jesus did miracles to confirm his spiritual claims, such as heal the paralyzed man (Mark 2:1–12), so he's certainly not asking us to have blind faith in him. But how much evidence that is convincing to us personally should we expect God to provide? I think everyone has different thresholds, but my sense is that God provides everyone with enough evidence that they *can* believe in him (cf. Rom. 1:20), but not with so much evidence that they *have to* believe in him. Faith is thus a choice to trust God, based on reasonable, but not overwhelming, evidence that he exists and is trustworthy. God apparently does not want coerced love, faith, and trust.

These three points gave me a framework to understand the data and its significance. It also gave me some sympathy for modern skeptics. In the remainder of this chapter, I'll present evidence from archaeology that gives us reason to trust the Bible, the God behind it, and the salvation that he offers.

### **The Resurrection**

The physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning is the heart of the Christian message. Thus, it is striking that most liberal and critical scholars today grant that the apostles and the early church *believed and taught* that Jesus had physically risen from the dead, although they deny that it actually happened (remember, in order to be “scientific,” scholars today must

explain away miracles). This position is considerably more conservative than that of liberal skeptics decades ago who held that Jesus's resurrection and divine nature were myths that grew up around the "Jesus cult" some centuries later. The primary reasons for this shift are the early dates now accepted for the Gospels and book of Acts (following the work of Ramsay and others), and the recognition of simple credal statements (easy-to-remember phrases expressing core beliefs) embedded in the Gospels and Epistles, that appear to predate the New Testament itself. For example, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians states,

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:3–7).

Gary Habermas is a modern-day Frank Morison who has devoted his career to assessing the evidence for the resurrection. His discussion and resources on early creeds are readily available.<sup>5</sup> Habermas is also well known for his "minimal facts argument," which builds a strong case for the historicity of the resurrection based on ancient secular sources and biblical sources that almost all liberal scholars today will accept as genuine (for example, that Paul actually wrote Romans and 1 Corinthians).<sup>6</sup>

### *The Empty Tomb*

Is there archaeological evidence for Jesus's death and resurrection? During recent renovations at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, researchers exposed what appears to have been the actual stone slab where Jesus's body was laid,<sup>7</sup> which adds weight to the authenticity of the site.

### *Crucifixion*

Was Jesus crucified? Although Roman crucifixion is well attested and described in ancient written sources, only three skeletal examples survive to illustrate the brutal practice. Although the remains are difficult to interpret, they show at least that large nails were driven through the ankle bones of the victims to anchor them to wooden beams.<sup>8</sup>

### *Early Christian Burials*

Is there archaeological evidence for a Christian community living in Jerusalem, as described in the book of Acts? Jerusalem was densely populated in Herodian times and until its destruction in AD 70. To save space, it became customary during this period to transfer the bones of the deceased to ossuaries (“bone boxes”) after their bodies had decayed away. Usually quarried from local limestone, ossuaries were often decorated and commonly had the name of the person(s) interred, their family relationship(s), and other notes chiseled on the box. Interestingly, ossuaries with crosses and other Christian symbols were found at three sites near Jerusalem: The Mount of Offence near Bethany, the tomb of Talpiot south of Jerusalem, and the Dominus Flevit site on the Mount of Olives.<sup>9</sup> The Talpiot ossuaries are clearly datable to before AD 70, they bear Jewish names, and in addition to some bearing the cross symbol, two boxes appear to have laments saying, “Jesus, woe!” on them. E. L. Sukenik, the famous Jewish archaeologist who excavated the Talpiot tombs, concludes his report on these finds by noting that the tomb was apparently in use until the middle of the first century AD (certainly not later than AD 70). He said, “All our evidence indicates that we have in this tomb the earliest records of Christianity in existence. It may also have a bearing on the historicity of Jesus and the crucifixion.”<sup>10</sup>

These burial evidences of a Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem within decades after Jesus’s death, plus the now generally accepted early dates for the Gospels, and the embedded creeds in the New Testament (NT) strengthen the case that “something revolutionary” happened in a tomb outside Jerusalem early one morning about 2,000 years ago.

### **The Great Isaiah Scroll**

Reports and followers’ beliefs about someone rising from the dead may be interesting, but what is the significance and meaning of such an event, if it actually did happen? This is where the greatest archaeological discovery of the twentieth century, the Dead Sea Scrolls, comes into play.<sup>11</sup> Among the thousands of manuscripts and manuscript fragments recovered in Qumran beginning in 1947, the most striking is the Great Isaiah Scroll, retrieved virtually intact, which contains the complete book of Isaiah and which carbon dates back to at least 100 BC.<sup>12</sup> What stunned scholars was that the text of the Isaiah scroll is essentially identical to the next-earliest Hebrew copy of Isaiah known, a codex dating to about AD 1000. This accurate preservation of the text for over a millennium confirmed Jewish scribal traditions about the extreme care they took in hand copying OT documents.

Here’s the significance. Chapter 53 in the book of Isaiah presents the most detailed and extended passage about the torture, death, and exultation of a future “suffering servant” who would die for the sins of the Jewish people. This prediction, dating back to the time of Isaiah and Hezekiah, who lived around 700 BC, set the Jewish cultural expectation of a messiah/redeemer who would someday come to rescue his people through substitutionary atonement. When John

the Baptist pointed at Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), everyone knew what he was talking about. Jesus did not arrive and act in a historical vacuum. A culture was prepared centuries in advance to expect him. Thus, the resurrection fits into a broader historical narrative where we are told its meaning and which we can document to well before Jesus’s lifetime. The Great Isaiah Scroll is proof that this prediction was not edited or massaged by either Christians or Jews at a later date.

### **Seals of Hezekiah and Isaiah**

In 2018, Eilat Mazar reported the discovery of clay bullae (round seals) bearing impressions from the seals of King Hezekiah and the Prophet Isaiah, a few feet apart from each other in a royal fortress/palace area of ancient Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> These bullae are signature seals, a common form of identification and security at the time, where a small lump of wet clay was applied to a jar cover or to the string tying a document, and then stamped with one’s personal seal. During a destructive fire the clay is heated and becomes a ceramic, and thus is preserved, while the papyrus or skin document or jar cover is burned. To have direct evidence of a seal that one can hold in one’s hand from a famous biblical character who lived 2,700 years ago has the powerful impact of making ancient history come alive!

### **“Throwaway Details”**

Archaeological evidence exists for many other kings of Israel and Judah, such as Jehu, Ahaz, and Jehoiachin, but a skeptic would say that it’s not surprising to recover things relating to the leaders of a country. However, if the stories about what they did are legends, then one would expect the side characters in these tales generally to be fictitious. Thus, one recent discovery is striking. In 2007, Professor Michael Jursa discovered a Babylonian tablet in the British Museum archives. It was a temple gift receipt for Nebo-Sarsekim, the chief eunuch of Nebuchadnezzar II, dated to 595 BC. This is the same official described in Jeremiah 39 who was present at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. As one scholar notes, that the Bible gets these “throwaway details” right when telling the story adds considerable weight to the truthfulness of the narrative.<sup>14</sup>

### **Seeing the Evidence**

In archaeology we can only hope to recover a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of the original material culture from biblical times. While the skeptic might take comfort in the fact that very little of the Bible can thus be confirmed directly through archaeology, the trend in what has been recovered should give the skeptic serious pause. If the tiny fraction that we are finding supports the biblical account—implying that the biblical authors got the “throwaway details” right—then



certainly this suggests that they got the main points right as well. Thus, I find that archaeology gives me sufficient evidence that I *can* believe the Bible, but not so much evidence that it *forces* someone to believe it. As mentioned earlier, this appears to be in keeping with God’s character, as genuine love cannot be forced.

But I also find something else. I prefer to live with “the least amount of faith,” if you will. No one can *prove* that their position is correct. The skeptic needs to have faith in their conclusions, like I have faith in mine. But I think the cumulative evidence from archaeology requires less faith from me to believe at least the core aspects of Jesus’s life, ministry, resurrection, and its significance, than that required to continue to shrug off the stories as myth and wishful thinking. Did it happen? Is it true? While I might not be able to prove it deductively, there’s evidence beyond a reasonable doubt that I think would stand in a court of law.<sup>15</sup>

In a sense, all of us are like I was in my early childhood: extremely nearsighted. We cannot see any significant distance into the past, and what is available to see at present is only a tiny fraction of that ancient world. What will we make of the data that we *do* have, and the trend that it shows?<sup>16</sup> What I have found is that through the eyeglasses of a relationship with Jesus, based solely on his sacrifice to cover my sins, I have a clear and robust perspective on the present, the past, and the future. So, does it matter? Most definitely.

#### Notes:

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2. William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Andesite Press, 2017).
3. Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *More than a Carpenter*, rev. ed., (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2009).
4. This is famously presented in Richard C. Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons,” *The New York Review*, January 9, 1997, [nybooks.com/articles/1997/01/09/billions-and-billions-of-demons/](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/01/09/billions-and-billions-of-demons/).
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6. Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004); Gary Habermas, *Evidence for the Historical Jesus: Is the Jesus of History the Christ of Faith* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2020). See

also Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, vol. 1 (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2024).

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9. Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: The Life of Jesus and the Early Church* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 359–374.
10. E. L. Sukenik, “The Earliest Records of Christianity,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 51, no. 4 (October–December 1947), 351–365, [jstor.org/stable/500006](https://www.jstor.org/stable/500006).
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15. J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013).

16. For further reading, I recommend the following books by Titus Kennedy: *Unearthing the Bible: 101 Archaeological Discoveries That Bring the Bible to Life* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2020); *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus: The Archaeology and History of Christ and the Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2022); and *The Essential Archaeological Guide to Bible Lands: Uncovering Biblical Sites of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean World* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023).