

The Importance Of Dating

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Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," August 2000

In the fall of 1985, an Ambassador College instructor began his course on Ancient Israel by passing out an article titled "The Importance of Dating" by Paul W. Lapp. All the students got a good laugh at this, since to us college students this was a double entendre. Most of us already knew dating was important—to our social lives!

However, the article had nothing to do with the social interaction of members of the opposite sex. No, the article, published in the March 1977 issue of *The Biblical Archaeology Review*, dealt with the question of whether archeology can provide precise historical chronology. Lapp, a former Director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, answers with a qualified "yes." With as many excavations as have been completed over the past century and a half, one would think he could have been a bit more confident.

Sadly, he could not be. Archeology, considered by most to be scientific, is as much art as science. Though the archeologist is very precise in locating, measuring and describing an object he has dug from the soil of an excavation, he must then interpret it in the context of similar finds of his own and those of other scholars, as well as place it in the milieu of "known" history. Sometimes his interpretation is valid, and sometimes it proves to be faulty. Unfortunately, decades may pass before a mistake is recognized, casting suspicion on any material based on the original, wrong interpretation.

Although archeology occurs worldwide and probes the remains of nearly every historical culture, biblical archeology is the original and driving force behind the profession. The earliest archeologists descended upon the lands of the Bible to prove to the world that the Word of God is true history. They proclaimed their sensational finds with bold statements that they had found Ur of the Chaldees, the hitherto forgotten Hittites and Joshua's Jericho.

This was both good and bad. Their zeal and belief were commendable, but their methods left something to be desired. They often rushed both to dig and to judgment, doing irreparable damage to the sites and taking great leaps of faith in their interpretations. In many cases, because of this "unscientific" approach, many modern scholars refuse to give credence to early finds.

In addition, because later finds seemed to contradict the Bible's accounts, successive generations of archeologists have become increasingly skeptical, even contemptuous, of those attempting to verify biblical history through archeology. In fact, those who do often receive ridicule as "fundamentalists" and "believers." Their work, even if it conforms to or surpasses the scientific standards of archeology, is subject to all sorts of prejudiced and sometimes underhanded attacks.

Paul's words in Romans 1:18-19 ring true of modern, scientific archeology:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead.

Plenty of artifacts from the ancient Near East support the general historicity of the Bible, and some would claim that many *prove* its historical accuracy. However, Satan, the enemy of God and His people and the deceiver of the whole world (Revelation 12:9), has an ace up his sleeve that confuses all attempts to demonstrate the Bible's validity as a historical document: chronology.

Going Out on a Date

Perhaps one can appreciate undated archeological artifacts for their cultural import, but they only take on real significance if they can be set in their proper time and place. Even generally dating a find, then, is important to reconstructing the history, culture and chronology of any level of a dig. However, when an archeologist places a date on an artifact, he is often stepping out on a limb.

Obviously, no artifact contains an inscription saying, "Made in Canaan, 1121 BC." Before "modern" times, no universally accepted method of numbering the years existed. In fact, even coins stamped with the names of the king under which they were minted (after about 500 BC) must be matched to the chronology of the nation's king list, many of which are disputed.

For instance, scholars disagree even on the most fundamental of chronologies, the lengths of the Egyptian dynasties and their individual pharaohs. When reading a certain author, an archeologist must be aware of the author's bias toward the high, middle or low pharaonic chronologies. This is significant because the dating of most Near Eastern artifacts ultimately derives from comparisons to Egyptian dates.

We can suppose that an archeologist finds a scarab bearing the hieroglyphs of a pharaoh in an excavation in Israel. This excites the archeologist because it allows him to either date or confirm the date of the particular layer in which he found it. This sounds reasonable until one understands that, depending on which chronology he favors, his dating of the layer could be out a hundred years or more! Beyond that, he does not know for sure if the scarab was newly made when it was deposited in the layer, or if it had been passed down as an heirloom for a few generations. The archeologist also has to wonder if the scarab even belongs on the layer in which he found it, since it may have slipped through a crack between layers!

Similar problems exist with other dating methods. The ubiquitous find at a site is pottery. Archeologists have made detailed studies of ancient ceramics and cataloged their shapes, sizes, types of clay used, decorations, firing characteristics, etc. They have been able to show that certain types of pottery existed in particular times and places, allowing them to assign *relative* dates to other objects found on the same level.

Even pottery, though, is far from exact. Some types of pottery are unique to a certain area. Others occur in one place and not in another only a short distance away. Some simple styles endured for centuries, while types that are more exotic lasted only a short while. Even the aforementioned Paul W. Lapp, an expert in ceramics, writes: "In our present state of refinement, and with few exceptions, we are able to date larger ceramic groups from the late fourth millennium BC through the first century AD within a century" (p. 17). To put that in understandable terms, archeology could date a modern artifact to some time between Theodore Roosevelt and Bill Clinton!

New Chronologies

Because dating is so inexact, archeologists and historians are constantly bickering over chronologies and devising new ones to satisfy what they believe are the facts. For example, four different Egyptian dynasties get credit for the Exodus: the 6th, 13th, 18th and 19th. Depending on which chronology one uses, these dynasties cover a range of over a thousand years!

To further complicate matters, these same scholars designate cultural periods based on common finds (mostly pottery and weaponry) and stack them like layers on a cake: Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age. Because these ages are too broad, they have had to break them down further into Early, Middle and Late periods, and most of these periods are further subdivided in I and II eras (and sometimes III and IV!). In at least one case, Middle Bronze II, an era is divided yet again into A, B and C.

Where does one place David, for instance? Most historians, if they even believe he existed, would say he lived around 1000 BC in Iron I. How do they know that Israel had an Iron I culture in 1000 BC? The pottery that they found in a certain layer had pottery or weapons that matched other finds at other sites dated to 1000 BC. However, if the original finds were misdated even by a century or so, David could have lived during Late Bronze II or Iron II!

We must also take into account that cultural advances did not take place uniformly. The Bible itself tells us that the Philistines monopolized the working of iron, giving them a pronounced military advantage over Israel (I Samuel 13:19). Iron implements would be rare in Israelite areas, while bronze implements would be more plentiful. Therefore, Saul's and David's early period might be better considered as Late Bronze, while only a few miles away, the Philistines enjoyed an Iron Age culture. It is not hard to see that these labels are quite ambiguous.

The latest new chronology by David Rohl, a British Egyptologist, dramatically rearranges Near Eastern history. In his book, *Pharaohs and Kings* (published in Britain as *A Test of Time*), he argues that, by reducing the length of the Third Intermediary Period—a very confused period in Egypt with meager historical data—he can identify Joseph, Moses, Saul and David in the archeological record. To him, historians have merely been looking in the wrong periods for these biblical figures!

Much work still needs to be done to refine his theory, but other scholars are slowly recognizing it as worthy of attention if not acceptance. If nothing else, it gives those of us who believe God and His Word a little extra boost to our faith. Knowing that Bible is historically true as well as spiritually true increases our confidence and hope.

Dating and Prophecy

What does historical chronology have to do with prophecy? Fortunately, in most cases it is not necessary to deal with chronology when studying prophetic texts. There are two cases, however, when an accurate date is important:

1. When checking a prophecy's date against its fulfillment.

For instance, Isaiah prophesies of Cyrus being God's anointed instrument in Isaiah 44-45, naming him and foretelling his overthrow of Babylon and his command to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Historians agree that Cyrus did these things in 539-538 BC. Isaiah, who prophesied during the reigns of several Judean kings including Hezekiah, probably gave this prophecy near the end of the 8th century BC—about 150 years before Cyrus was even born!

2. When a prophecy's interpretation is dependent upon a historical event or date.

Several prophecies include within them long periods of time that must pass before their fulfillment. Perhaps the best known of these is the Seventy Weeks Prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27, which covers nearly 500 years of elapsed time. These five centuries are meaningless without a firm date to anchor their commencement, because the angel Gabriel tells Daniel that the 70 weeks begins "from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem" (verse 25). When 69 weeks elapse, Messiah is revealed, and He will be cut off "in the middle of the [70th] week" (verses 26-27). The only command that "fits" the criteria is one given by Artaxerxes I in 457 BC (Ezra 7:11-26). Adding the 69 weeks (483 years) brings us to AD 27, when Jesus Christ began His ministry in Galilee.

David Rohl suggests that we should never be too dogmatic about dates before the sack of Thebes by Assyrian King Ashurbanipal in 664 BC. Before this significant event, chronologies are merely constructs from available information and subject to revision. The further back in time we go the greater the margin of error, sometimes, as Lapp pointed out, more than a century.

The dating of biblical events has some importance to both history and prophecy. We should not be discouraged if the current scholarly consensus advocates dates that are incompatible with our understanding of Scripture. Who knows? Discoveries being made right now could force scholars to reevaluate their chronologies. Whatever happens, God's people have the added assurance that history will be set straight when Christ returns to set up His Kingdom!