



Part Two

Old Testament Archaeology 3

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Joshua

“And Joshua said to the people, ‘Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.’ Joshua 3:5

Here we go again with the supernatural. Atheists don't believe in the supernatural, so it's time to close the book. But I didn't close the book – I kept reading.

This series, *Convince Me There's A God*, is my answer to questions atheists have been asking me for more than 40 years about why I 'abandoned' atheism and 'converted' to Christianity. Many have accused me of being on drugs at the time of my conversion or having gone insane. Neither is true. I became convinced after a lengthy investigation into the claims of Christianity that the God of the Bible exists and Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

My conversion from atheism to theism was intellectual, not emotional. It was based on many kinds of evidence, but the evidence that kept me reading and asking questions about the Bible was archaeological evidence. Did that evidence “prove” God's existence to me? No, but it did show me that the Bible was a credible ancient historical document and kept me interested in learning more.

The Book of Joshua is about how a man named Joshua led the people of Israel from the wilderness north of ancient Egypt into the 'promised' land of Canaan.

“So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan.” Joshua 3:14-17

Putting aside my atheistic skepticism about the supernatural for a few moments, I looked at whether anything about Israel's crossing from the wilderness into Canaan had any archaeological support. What about the ancient communities of Adam, Zaretan and Jericho? What about the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, and the Jordan River? What about Israel's supposed crossing over the Jordan on dry ground? Any evidence for any of it? [Keep in mind that I was researching these questions in 1971, so what I'm sharing is what was

available at that time.]

City of Adam

The city of “Adam” mentioned in Joshua is believed by many researchers to be *Tel ed-Damieh* located near the Jabbok River (modern Nahr ez-Zerqa) and Zaretan. Tel ed-Damieh is about 16 miles north of Jericho (Tek es-Sultan). Historians have noted a blocking of the Jordan River in that same area in 1160, 1267, 1534, 1834 (AD) and again in 1927 when earth tremors caused large amounts of rock and dirt to fall into the river and block it for many hours. The flow of the Jordan is north to south, so a blockage several miles north of the place where Israel crossed into Canaan might be possible. The Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea) is south of Israel's crossing, so that would explain the “failure” of the waters to go “down into” the Sea with a north-to-south river flow (see map).

According to the Bible's story Joshua already had an idea of what he was getting into before he led Israel to cross the Jordan River.

“Now Joshua the son of Nun sent out two men from Acacia Grove to spy secretly, saying, ‘Go, view the land, especially Jericho’ ... And they said to Joshua, “Truly the Lord has delivered all the land into our hands, for indeed all the inhabitants of the country are fainthearted because of us.” Joshua 2:1, 24

The Bible claims Joshua sent two spies to view the land Israel would be traveling to, especially the city of Jericho. They were emboldened by news while spying in Jericho that the people there feared the God of Israel.

“I know that the Lord has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.”
Joshua 2:9-11

With this news ringing in his ears, Joshua led Israel to cross the Jordan and attack Jericho on God’s orders.

“You shall march around the city, all you men of war; you shall go all around the city once. This you shall do six days. And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark. But the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. It shall come to pass, when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, that all the

people shall shout with a great shout; then the wall of the city will fall down flat. And the people shall go up every man straight before him ... So the people shouted when the priests blew the trumpets. And it happened when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat. Then the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.” Joshua 6:3-5, 20

Did this really happen? We look to archaeology for answers.

Archaeology and Jericho

The first official archaeological find concerning the ancient city of Jericho was in 1868 by Sir Charles Warren. General Warren was an officer in the British Royal Engineers at the time he led excavations in Jericho, Jerusalem and other sites. By digging several vertical shafts at the Jericho site, Warren determined that the tells (mounds) were the ruins of an ancient people. Warren reportedly dug through mud bricks of one wall, but didn't realize its importance.

The next archaeological team to excavate Tell es-Sultan (ancient Jericho) and Tulul Abu el-'Alayiq (3kms southwest of Jericho) included German archaeologist Carl Watzinger and theologian Ernst Sellin from 1907-1909. They discovered the twin cities of Jericho about a mile apart. One was the old city and the other was a more recent Roman city. They discovered remains of two walls which they

believed dated to the biblical account (Late Bronze Age – 1550-1200 BC), but later dated the walls to the Middle Bronze Age (2100-1550 BC).

Archaeologist John Garstang excavated Jericho between 1930 and 1936 and dated the upper wall to the biblical account. Garstang and his team dug to the beginnings of the city and found four levels of inhabitation. Garstang was especially interested in the walls of each inhabitation and dated the first to about 3,000 BC. He dated the second city wall to 2,500 BC and the third wall to 1,800 BC. The fourth wall stood on top of the others and had a double enclosure. The first wall was about six-feet thick, the second wall was 12-feet thick and higher than the first. Garstang found that the walls had fallen outward and there was evidence of an intense fire and believed the biblical account was correct. He dated the destruction of City IV to about 1400 BC.

Archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon excavated at Jericho from 1952 to 1958 and believed that Jericho was already in ruins at the time the Bible claims Joshua and Israel were attacking and destroying the city. She dated the destruction of City IV to about 1550 BC and believed it remained unoccupied for more than a century-and-a-half after that. Kenyon's findings led many to believe Israel's conquest of Jericho may have been much later than the Bible's date.

As I was investigating the various findings of excavations at Jericho, archaeologists were still debating the issue of the dating of the destruction of the walled city. Though I found the debate about dating interesting, what kept me searching was the fact that the ancient walls of Jericho were found to have fallen outward, the city burned with intense heat and the lack of habitation for a long time following the destruction. I didn't know what it might prove, but the Bible story had a ring of truth to it. I was determined to learn more.

Details

“Now the Lord said to Joshua: ‘Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed; take all the people of war with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land. 2 And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king.’ Joshua 8:1-2

Investigating what the Bible claims Joshua and the army of Israel did in Canaan involves a lot of detailed work. That’s because the Bible claims Israel defeated 31 city kings during the 14th century BC. As an atheist journalist in 1971, that looked like evidence that could be verified or denied using the tools of both history and archaeology. What did I find?

The 12th Chapter of the Book of Joshua lists the 31 kings that Israel supposedly defeated during its military campaign in Canaan.

“And these are the kings of the country which Joshua and the children of Israel conquered on this side of the Jordan, on the west, from Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon as far as Mount Halak and the ascent to Seir, which Joshua gave to the tribes of Israel as a possession according to their divisions, in the mountain country, in the lowlands, in the Jordan plain, in the slopes, in the wilderness, and in the South—the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites: the king of Jericho, one; the king of Ai,

which is beside Bethel, one; the king of Jerusalem, one; the king of Hebron, one; the king of Jarmuth, one; the king of Lachish, one; the king of Eglon, one; the king of Gezer, one; the king of Debir, one; the king of Geder, one; the king of Hormah, one; the king of Arad, one; the king of Libnah, one; the king of Adullam, one; the king of Makkedah, one; the king of Bethel, one; the king of Tappuah, one; the king of Hopher, one; the king of Aphek, one; the king of Lasharon, one; the king of Madon, one; the king of Hazor, one; the king of Shimron Meron, one; the king of Achshaph, one; the king of Taanach, one; the king of Megiddo, one; the king of Kedesh, one; the king of Jokneam in Carmel, one; the king of Dor in the heights of Dor, one; the king of the people of Gilgal, one; the king of Tirzah, one—all the kings, thirty-one.” Joshua 12:7-24

The first thing I noticed was the historical specificity of the list. It was not a general, sweeping statement about Joshua and the army of Israel defeating “all the kings of the land” or something along that line. The list was so specific that each one could be investigated.

Journalists, like historians and archaeologists, work with specifics. That’s necessary to the job. If I arrive at the scene of a crime and ask questions about what happened, I expect to get specific answers to specific questions. Some people answer journalist’s questions in a general way, as in “somebody died.” Any experienced journalist knows they need more for a story than “somebody died.” Follow-up questions would include “who died,” “how did they die,” “did you see

them die,” “do you know the dead person,” “do you know the person you say killed them,” etc. Journalists are interested in facts, corroboration of those facts, and reliable witnesses to those facts.

Archaeologists and historians have their own “process” during excavations and investigations that have some similarity to the journalistic process. I wondered what they had discovered about the truth claims in Joshua.

We’ve already addressed the information about Canaanite kings that archaeologists and historians found in the Tell el-Amarna letters. Many of the letters were from city-state kings and leaders in Canaan asking Egypt for help in dealing with a conquering force known as the ‘Habiru’ (also spelled Hapiru) during the approximate time the Bible claims Joshua was leading Israel into Canaan.

Another archaeological artifact that impacts the investigation is known as the Merneptah Stele. It contains an inscription from Pharaoh Merneptah (reigned during the latter part of the 13th century BC) mentioning the defeat of Israel, along with Egypt’s defeat of other Canaanite cities (e.g. Gaza, Ashkelon, Gezer, Yanoam). One thing significant about this stele is that the Egyptian king confirmed that Israel was already an established people group in Canaan in the 13th century BC. That fits with the story timeline about Israel in the Books of Joshua and Judges. Interestingly, the hieroglyphs that refer to Israel include a symbol used for “foreign” or semi-nomadic people without a king and capital city. That also fits with the Bible history that

Israel was ruled by judges until the middle to latter part of the 11th century BC when Saul became the nation's first king.

Another important note before we move on is that Joshua 12 is specifically about kings that Israel conquered – “And these *are* the kings of the country which Joshua and the children of Israel conquered...” Atheists, agnostics and other non-Christians often accuse Bible believers of being wrong concerning the burning of all of the 31 cities mentioned in the list. Joshua 12 is about conquered kings, not cities burned. According to the Book of Joshua, Israel burned three cities during its conquest of Canaan: Jericho (Joshua 6:24), Ai (Joshua 8:28), and Hazor (Joshua 11:11). British archaeologists John Garstang and Kathleen Kenyon confirmed the [burning of ancient Jericho](#). Archaeologists prior to 1971 did not confirm the burning at what was believed to be the Ai site (Et Tell), but other archaeologists since that time did find evidence of the [burning of ancient Ai](#) at what is now believed to be the ancient Ai site (Khirbet el-Maqtir), located about half-a-mile west of Et Tell. Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin excavated the Hazor site during the 1950 and 1960s and confirmed the [burning of ancient Hazor](#).

Another question I had about the historical accuracy of the Old Testament concerned Israel's supposed King David. Was he a real person?

David

If you were fortunate enough to be able to visit The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City the last few months of 2014, you could have visited the amazing exhibition titled – “*Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age*.” One of the extraordinary archaeological objects available to view was the **House of David Stele** from the 9th century BC.

The year was 1993 AD. Israeli archaeologist Avraham Biran and his team were excavating at Tel Dan in northern Israel. They discovered the first of three stone fragments known as the [Tel Dan Stele](#). In lines 8 and 9 of the stele, written in ancient Aramaic, the words “king of Israel” and “house of David” are written.

The stele is a commemoration of the victory of an Aramean king over two kings to the south: one a “king of Israel” and the other a “king of the House of David.” Many scholars who have studied the stele believe it recounts a campaign of Hazael of Damascus against Israel’s King Jehoram and Judah’s King Ahaziah.

What is significant about the Tel Dan Stele is that it was the first archaeological evidence of the name of the Bible’s King David. However, that was 1993. My investigation into the claims of the Bible was during the first part of 1971, more than 20 years before the discovery of the Tel Dan Stele. Did that mean no archaeological evidence was available to me that would confirm the existence of

King David?

King David is mentioned more than a thousand times in the Bible. While archaeological discoveries concerning the validity of the Bible as a credible historical document were interesting to see, extra-biblical discoveries were my preference as an atheist.

One archaeological find available to me was the Mesha Stele, also known as the Moabite Stone. I referred to it more than a year ago in this [series about archaeology and the Bible](#). Here is a quick summary about the stele from that post:

“F.A. Klein discovered the stone in 1868 and a French scholar named Charles Clermont-Ganneau made a ‘squeeze’ impression of the writing for further investigation. Arabs in possession of the stone reportedly broke it into several pieces. However, more than half of the stone’s pieces were found and eventually housed at the Louvre in Paris.

Dating of the Mesha Stele is to the middle of the 9th century BC. It commemorates the victory of King Mesha and his troops over the king of Israel and his armies. Here’s how the Moabite inscription reads. (A reminder that Chemosh was the chief god of the Moabite people.)

‘I (am) Mesha, son of Chemosh-[...], king of Moab, the Dibonite—my father (had) reigned over Moab thirty years, and I reigned after

my father,—(who) made this high place for Chemosh in Qarhoh [...] because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries. As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years (lit., days), for Chemosh was angry at his land. And his son followed him and he also said, ‘I will humble Moab.’ In my time he spoke (thus), but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel hath perished forever’ (Pritchard, 1958a, p. 209).

The Mesha Stele names the nation Israel and two of its kings, Omri and his son. King Mesha admitted that King Omri humbled Moab for many days, but said it was because Chemosh was angry at his land. Mesha said that Omri’s son also humbled Moab, but that Mesha triumphed over him and his house ... what we see is the record of an ancient enemy king of Israel confirming basic historical information about Israel’s kings, their humbling of Moab and a revolt by Moab against Israel.”

[A recent reconstructed translation of the damaged portion of line 31 of the inscription demonstrates another usage of the phrase “house of David.” The stone reads ‘b[-]wd’, but independent scholarly analysis found traces of a ‘t’ after the ‘b’, which would mean the inscription reads ‘bt[-]wd. Some scholars are confident based on that finding that the full inscription reads ‘btdwd’ – ‘House of David.’ Again, that information was not available to me in 1971, so I could not consider it during my investigation.]

What I learned about King Omri was that he was king of the northern kingdom of Israel during the early part of the 9th century BC. According to the Bible the kings of the northern kingdom were not from the lineage of King David. David's descendants reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah. I also learned something about the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah which helped me in searching through archaeological information.

A Little History

According to the dating of the Bible, David became the king of a unified Israel at the end of the 11th century BC that included all 12 tribes of Israel. David's son Solomon became king of a unified Israel in about 970 BC and reigned until his death in about 930 BC. Solomon's son Rehoboam was supposed to become king of a unified Israel, but the majority of tribes revolted against Rehoboam with these words:

“What share have we in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Now, see to your own house, O David!” 1 Kings 12:16

According to the Bible, that was the beginning of the divided kingdoms. Rehoboam became king of the southern kingdom of Judah with a capital in Jerusalem. Jeroboam the son of Nebat (not of the lineage of David) became king of the northern kingdom of Israel with a capital in Shechem.

Jeroboam spent some time in Egypt before returning to Israel and developed a relationship with the Pharaoh Shishak (Hebrew spelling for the Egyptian Sheshonq I). Shishak attacked Rehoboam and the southern kingdom of Judah during the middle of the 10th century BC. Though Shishak did not defeat Rehoboam, the pharaoh did claim to have defeated 150 cities in the area.

Archaeologist Clarence Fisher made a discovery at Tel Megiddo in 1925 that gave researchers new insight into Pharaoh Shishak's attack. The '[Sheshonq I Megiddo Stele](#)' (dated to about 925 BC) lists the victories the pharaoh claimed in Canaan.

Another archaeological discovery is the [Bubastite Portal](#), also known as the [Shishak Relief](#). It is located in Karnak, Egypt and records the military campaigns of Sheshonq I in Israel and other areas of Canaan.

The Bible claims that Pharaoh Shishak attacked Jerusalem and stole treasures from Solomon's Temple in the fifth year of King Rehoboam. According to the Bible's timeline, that would be about 925 BC.

"It happened in the fifth year of King Rehoboam that Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. And he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house; he took away everything. He also took away all the gold shields which Solomon had made." 1 Kings 14:25-26

Kings, Kingdoms and Archaeology

Archaeologists have made many discoveries that support information in the Bible about the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah and their enemies. Here are some examples:

[Karnak Temple Shishak Relief](#)

[Megiddo Seal Jeroboam Inscription](#)

[The Moabite \(Mesha\) Stone](#)

[Berlin Statue Pedestal Relief](#)

[The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III](#)

[Jezebel Seal](#)

[The Jehu Relief](#)

[Tell al-Rimah Stele](#)

[Tiglath-Pileser III Stele](#)

[Hoshea Seal](#)

[Uzziah Tablet Inscription](#)

[King Ahaz Seal](#)

[Siloam Inscription](#)

[The Seal of Baruch](#)

Lachish Letters

Babylon Chronicles

Jehoiachin Ration Document

Though I did not have archaeological evidence in 1971 to the name of King David, I did have ample evidence to many of the kings who followed David. The evidence was strong enough for me to continue my investigation.

Prove It!

“Now it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and encamped against it; and they built a siege wall against it all around. So the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.” 2 Kings 25:1-2

According to the Bible's description and timeline, the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah were conquered by foreign armies in the late 8th century BC (Israel) and early 6th century BC (Judah).

Really? **Prove it!**

That was my attitude as an atheist. Make all the claims you want, Bible believer, the burden is on *you* to prove it. As it turned out during my investigation into the 'truth claims' in the Bible, Christian apologists were able to show me evidence that pointed toward the existence of God.

I had found enough archaeological and historical evidence to warrant the continuation of my investigation into the Bible's claims about Israel leaving Egypt and settling into Canaan. I also found extra-biblical evidence for Israel and Judah as kingdoms during the Iron Age (Iron II), but would I find any evidence for foreign invasion, exile

and return?

I read an interesting article recently about a [new exhibition of ancient clay tablets](#). The tablets were discovered in Iraq and archaeologists with expertise in ancient Babylonia and Assyria said they shed light on the time Jews spent in Babylonia more than 2500 years ago.

More than a hundred cuneiform tablets were on exhibition that included details about the lives of Jewish families that had moved from Judea to Babylon during the early part of the 6th century BC.

As interesting as that is to me now, those tablets were not available to me 44 years ago when I was investigating whether the Bible contained credible historical information. I was an atheist and thought the Bible was filled with myth and legend and lacked any evidence that would support the existence of the 'God' of the Bible.

So, what did I find during my search in 1971 and was it enough to keep me searching for evidence?

Israel and Judah

You may remember from our last post that the united Kingdom of Israel divided after the death of King Solomon into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Here's an approximate timeline:

- Northern Kingdom of Israel — 930-722 BC
- Southern Kingdom of Judah — 930-586 BC

First, what the Bible claims. Then, what archaeological findings support the events.

“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.” 2 Kings 17:5-6

The ‘king of Assyria’ named in 2 Kings 17 was ‘Shalmaneser,’ but he wasn’t the first king of Assyria to challenge the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

“Pul 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. And Menahem exacted the money from Israel, from all the very wealthy, from each man fifty shekels of silver, to give to the king of Assyria. So the king of Assyria turned back, and did not stay there in the land.” 2 Kings 15:19-20

The biblical timeline has ‘Menahem’ becoming the king of Israel in the middle of the 8th century BC after assassinating King Shallum who had assassinated King Zechariah only a month earlier. King Menahem ruled for about ten years while paying tribute to King Pul of Assyria. *Pul* was another name for Tiglath-Pileser III who ruled Assyria from about 745–727 BC.

Even though the famous Incirli Stele paying homage to Tiglath Pileser was not discovered until 1993, archaeological discoveries concerning Tiglath-Pileser III were available for investigation in 1971.

- Stone Panel from Central Palace of Tiglath-pileser III (British Museum)
- The Nimrud Letters
- Tiglath Pileser III (Columbia University)
- Calah Inscriptions (Bethel University)
- Tiglath-Pileser III in Chariot
- Tiglath-Pileser III Carrying Staff
- Assyria Takes Israel Captive

The Bible relates how the Assyrian Empire took Israel captive during the reign of multiple kings.

First, a look at what the Bible claims, then what archaeologists have found.

“And they were unfaithful to the God of their fathers, and played the harlot after the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them. So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, that is, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria. He carried the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh into captivity. He took them to Halah, Habor, Hara, and the river of Gozan to this day.” 1 Chronicles 5:25-26

That was the beginning of Assyria taking the tribes of Israel captive. Israel had ten tribes and the first to go were the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. The Assyrian army took them to Halah, Habor, Hara, and the river of Gozan.

Archaeologists discovered ancient Assyrian cities in what is now northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. Some of the early archaeological work was done by Sir Austen Henry Layard and Paul Emil Botta during the mid-19th century AD.

“And the king of Assyria uncovered a conspiracy by Hoshea; for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, and brought no tribute to the king of Assyria, as he had done year by year. Therefore the king of Assyria shut him up, and bound him in prison. 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.”

2 Kings 17:4-6

This second invasion of Samaria (Israel) began under the rule of Shalmaneser V who became Assyria's king after the death of his father Tiglath-Pileser III. He died a few years later and was replaced by Sargon II (Sargon Stele) in 722 BC. The Assyrian army took the remaining tribes of Israel and forced them to move to what is now parts of Iraq, Turkey and Iran. They also brought people from many

areas of the Assyrian Empire to settle in Samaria in place of the tribes of Israel.

“Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities.” 2 Kings 17:24

King Sargon II died in 705 BC and his son Sennacherib became king. In 701 BC Sennacherib ordered his army to attack the Kingdom of Judah.

First, how the Bible describes the event.

“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 of Assyria at Lachish, saying, ‘I have done wrong; turn away from me; whatever you impose on me I will pay.’ And the king of Assyria assessed Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. So Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king’s house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord, and from the pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria.” 2 Kings 18:13-16

The Annals of Sennacherib record details of the event from the Assyrian perspective.

“As for Hezekiah the Judahite, who did not submit to my yoke: forty-six of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small towns in their area, which were without number, by levelling with battering-rams and by bringing up seige-engines, and by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breeches, I besieged and took them. 200,150 people, great and small, male and female, horses, mules, asses, camels, cattle and sheep without number, I brought away from them and counted as spoil. (Hezekiah) himself, like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city. I threw up earthworks against him—the one coming out of the city-gate, I turned back to his misery. His cities, which I had despoiled, I cut off from his land, and to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Silli-bêl, king of Gaza, I gave (them). And thus I diminished his land. I added to the former tribute, and I laid upon him the surrender of their land and imposts—gifts for my majesty. As for Hezekiah, the terrifying splendor of my majesty overcame him, and the Arabs and his mercenary troops which he had brought in to strengthen Jerusalem, his royal city, deserted him. In addition to the thirty talents of gold and eight hundred talents of silver, gems, antimony, jewels, large carnelians, ivory-inlaid couches, ivory-inlaid chairs, elephant hides, elephant tusks, ebony, boxwood, all kinds of valuable treasures, as well as his

daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians, which he had brought after me to Nineveh, my royal city. To pay tribute and to accept servitude, he dispatched his messengers.”
(Luckenbill, Daniel David. The Annals of Sennacherib. Oriental Institute Publications 2. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1924.)

This archaeological evidence was strong enough to keep me searching into the historical credibility of the Old Testament. In the next part of our research, we will look at the captivity of Judah more than a century later. What archaeological evidence will we find to support what the Bible claims?

Babylon

“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, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, on the aged or the weak; He gave them all into his hand. And all the articles from the house of God, great and small, the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his leaders, all these he took to Babylon. Then they burned the house of God, 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, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.” 2 Chronicles 36:15-21

The next step in the investigation was to see what archaeological support there was for Babylon defeating Judah, taking the people captive and destroying the capital city, Jerusalem.

The Bible claims that [King Josiah of Judah](#) was killed in [battle with the Egyptian army at Megiddo](#). [Necho](#) is mentioned as the pharaoh at the time. Dating of the kings of Judah from Solomon to Josiah puts the date of Josiah's death at about 609 BC. It goes on to say that the people of Judah made Josiah's 23-year-old son Jehoahaz king in his father's place. According to the Bible, Pharaoh Necho put Jehoahaz in prison at Riblah in the land of Hamath after just three months on the throne and that Jehoahaz died in Egypt. Necho made Josiah's 25-year-old son Eliakim Judah's king and changed his name to [Jehoiakim](#). Jehoiakim ruled for 11 years, but was a vassal of Egypt until Babylon took Judah from the Egyptians. The Bible claims Jehoiakim was [King Nebuchadnezzar's](#) vassal for three years, but then rebelled against him.

“And the Lord sent against him raiding bands of Chaldeans, bands of Syrians, bands of Moabites, and bands of the people of Ammon; He sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord which He had spoken by His servants the prophets.” 2 Kings 24:2

Jehoiakim died and his 18-year-old son [Jehoiachin](#) became king. He reigned in Jerusalem for three months and ten days. King Nebuchadnezzar summoned the young king to Babylon and made

Jehoiakim's 21-year-old brother [Zedekiah](#) king of Judah. He ruled as a vassal king for 11 years, but also rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. The Bible says that in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, in the tenth month on the tenth day of the month, King Nebuchadnezzar and his army came against Jerusalem and built a siege wall all around the city. By the ninth day of the fourth month, according to the Bible, the famine had become so severe in Jerusalem that there was no food for the people. Judah's army broke through the city wall and fled, but Babylonian soldiers captured Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho and took him to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. The soldiers killed Zedekiah's sons, then put out his eyes, put him in fetters and took him captive to Babylon.

What happened next, again according to the Bible, was the destruction of Jerusalem by the army of Babylon.

“And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month (which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon), Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord and the king's house; all the houses of Jerusalem, that is, all the houses of the great, he burned with fire. And all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls of Jerusalem all around. Then Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive the rest of the people who remained in the city and the defectors who had deserted to the king of Babylon, with the rest of the

multitude ... Thus Judah was carried away captive from its own land." 2 Kings 25:8-11, 21

History and Archaeology

The Bible makes a lot of historical claims concerning Judah and Babylon, so it should be easy to show that the Bible is not historical at all but filled with myths and legends. Right?

By the time I arrived at this point in my investigation 44 years ago, I had already seen strong evidence that the Bible was in fact historical rather than mythical. Would it prove itself so once again?

We've already seen that the Hebrew and Assyrian timelines agree about Assyria's defeat of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

The Hebrew (Old Testament) timeline would put Babylon's defeat of Zedekiah and destruction of Jerusalem about 586 BC. How does that square with ancient history and archaeology?

Babylon became a major empire toward the end of the 7th century BC under the leadership of Nabopolassar and his son, Nebuchadnezzar II. The ruins of Babylon are located about 55 miles south of Baghdad, Iraq, near the town of Al-Hillah.

Some of the archaeological finds supporting Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylon during the end of the 7th century and beginning of the 6th century BC and the Babylonian Captivity are:

- [Ishtar Gate](#)
- [Brick of Nebuchadnezzar II](#)
- [Cylinder of Nebuchadnezzar II](#)
- [Gold Delivery Tablet](#)
- [Babylonian Chronicle Tablet](#)
- [Nebo-Sarsekim Tablet](#)
- [Bronze Door Slab with Inscription](#)
- [Jehoiachin Ration Tablet](#)
- [Lachish Letter I](#)
- [Lachish Letter II](#)
- [Archaeology and Babylonian Captivity](#)

The Bible and Nebuchadnezzar

Several Books of the Bible record details of King Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Judah. They include:

2 Kings – “At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged.”

1 Chronicles – “Jehozadak went *into captivity* when the Lord carried Judah and Jerusalem into captivity by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.”

2 Chronicles – “Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against him, and bound him in bronze *fetters* to carry him off to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also carried off *some* of the articles from the house of the Lord to Babylon, and put them in his temple at Babylon.”

Ezra – “But because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, *who* destroyed this temple and carried the people away to Babylon.”

Nehemiah – “These *are* the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his city.”

Esther – “*Kish* had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been captured with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.”

Jeremiah – “And afterward,’ says the Lord, ‘I will deliver Zedekiah king of Judah, his servants and the people, and such as are left in this city from the pestilence and the sword and the famine, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of those who seek their life; and he shall strike them with the edge of the sword. He shall not spare them, or have pity or mercy.”

Ezekiel – “For thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold, I will bring against Tyre from the north Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses, with chariots, and with horsemen, and an army with many people.’”

Daniel – “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.”

Testable?

When a theist presents 'evidence' to an atheist for the existence of God, the atheist will often challenge the theist with whether the supernatural is 'falsifiable.' In other words, is a belief in God 'testable?' Atheists say that 'religious beliefs,' beliefs in the existence of a supernatural God, are not falsifiable because they cannot be verified or denied.

That was one of my challenges to theists, and Christians in particular, when I was an atheist. How can the theory of supernaturalism be tested empirically and shown to be false based on results from the testing (falsifiable)? Christians I talked with on my daily radio show would answer with a one-word answer — 'faith.' My answer to them was usually a question — 'faith in what? You can't see God, touch God, hear God, taste God or smell God. How can you test something that is not there?' You can imagine how popular I was with Christians in those days.

When I began my investigation into the truth claims of theism and Christianity, that issue of *falsifiability* was paramount in my processing the 'supposed evidence' of the supernatural. I kept searching for evidence that could be tested and found historical, archaeological and textual evidences testable.

Atheists now ask me why I even bothered with those evidences since none of them 'prove' the existence of God (the supernatural). My answer is simple: if Christianity could not stand up to an investigation of the most basic of natural information, then it certainly couldn't support the weightier matters of supernatural investigation. If Christianity failed at the basic level, I believed my investigation would have ended there.

Testing the Prophets

The Bible claims that God 'spoke' to people 'by the prophets' (Hebrews 1:1). Human speech – that might be 'testable,' thus 'falsifiable.' I didn't know any way to test that 'God' spoke to the prophets, but I could test whether what the prophets spoke could be verified or denied.

In previous articles we've looked at the archaeological and historical evidence about the ancient empires of [Assyria](#) and [Babylon](#) attacking Jews in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Comparing ancient documents and inscriptions contained enough verification to continue investigating. My next step was to test the prophets.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar. What, if any, archaeological finds support these three prophets? We'll begin with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah the Prophet

“The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month.” Jeremiah 1:1-3

The first paragraph in the Book of Jeremiah reads like history rather than myth or legend and so does the rest of Jeremiah. Here are some of the personal names, locations and time periods mentioned in the Book of Jeremiah along with links to historical information. Whenever possible I will link to non-Christian historical information since that's the only source I trusted as an atheist. Would you agree that Jeremiah reads more like history than myth?

Names — [Jeremiah](#), [Hilkiah](#), [King Josiah](#), [King Amon](#), [King Jehoiakim](#), [King Zedekiah](#), [King Hezekiah](#), [Shallum \(Jehoahaz\)](#), [Coniah](#), [Baal](#), [Molech \(Milcom\)](#), [Bel](#), [Marduk](#), [Abraham](#), [Isaac](#), [Jacob](#), [Rachel](#), [Esau](#), [Benjaminites](#), [queen of heaven](#), [Ammonites](#), [David](#), [Cushite](#), [Moses](#), [Samuel](#), [Manasseh](#), [Hezekiah](#), [Asherah](#), [Pashhur](#), [Melchiah](#), [Zephaniah](#), [Maaseiah](#), [Immer](#), [King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon](#), [Chaldeans](#), [Pharaoh Hophra \(Apries\)](#), [Pharaoh Neco](#), [kings of the land of Uz](#), [kings of the land of the Philistines](#), [kings of Tyre](#),

kings of Sidon, kings of the coastlands across the sea, Dedan, Tema, Buz, kings of Arabia, kings of Zimri, kings of Elam, kings of Media (Medes), king of Sheshach, Micah the Moreshite, Uriah, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Achbor, Ahikam, Shaphan, Hananiah, Azzur, queen mother, Elasah, Gemariah, Ahab, Kolaiah, Nehelamite, Jehoiada, Hanamel, Baruch, Neria, Mahseiah, Rechab, Rechabites, Jonadab, Hanan, Igdaliah, Aramean army, Micaiah, Elishama, Jehudi, Ishmael son of Nethaniah, Shelemiah, Cushi, Jerahmeel, Seraiah, Azriel, Abdeel, Jehucal, Ebed-melech, Jonathan, Nergalsharezer, Samgar-nebo, Sarechim the Rab-saris, Nebuzaradan (commander of the Babylonian guards), Nebushazban the Rab-saris, Kareah, Johanan, Jaazaniah, Hoshaiah, Hoshaiah, Azariah, Ludim, Hamutal, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, Nebo, Chemosh, Dedan, Ben-hadad

Locations — Anathoth, land of Benjamin, Judah, Jerusalem, Israel, Cyprus, Kedar, Memphis, Tahpanhes, Egypt, Nile, Assyria, Euphrates, Dan, Mount Ephraim, Zion, Topheth, Valley of Hinnom, Gilead, Edom, Moab, Tekoa, Beth-haccherem, Shiloh, Tarshish, Uphaz, Jordan, Negev, Arabah, People's Gate, Lebanon, Potsherd Gate, Upper Benjamin Gate, Babylon, Bashan, Abarim, Samaria, Sodom, Gomorrah, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod, Moab, New Gate, Kiriath-jearim, Gibeon, Ramah, Tower of Hananel, Corner Gate, Gareb, Goah, Kidron Valley, Horse Gate, Middle Gate, Mizpah, Geruth Chimham, Bethlehem, Migdol, land of Pathros, Carchemish, Thebes, Caphtor, Kiriathaim, Heshbon, Luhith, Horonaim, Aroer,

Arnon, Holon, Jahzah, Mephaath, Dibon, Neth-diblathaim, Beth-gamul, Beth-meon, Kerioth, Bozrah, Kir-heres, Sibmah, Jazer, Zoar, Eglath-shelishiyah, Nimrim, Ai, Teman, Red Sea, Damascus, Hamath, Arpad, Hazor, Elam, Carmel, Bashan, Merathaim, Pekod, Leb-qamai, Ararat, Minni, Ashkenaz, Media, Chaldea, Libnah, Jericho, Riblah, Hamath, Rabbah

Time periods — in the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign, end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah, until the carrying away of Jerusalem in the fifth month, fourth year of Jehoiakim, first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon until this very day—23 years—, 70 years of desolation of land of Judah while Judeans serve the king of Babylon, punish the king of Babylon when the 70 years are completed, beginning of the reign of Zedekiah in the fifth month of the fourth year, in the seventh month, tenth year of Zedekiah, eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, fourth year of Jehoiakim, fifth year of Jehoiakim in the ninth month, ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah in the tenth day of the tenth month, fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year on the ninth day of the month, Zedekiah was 21 years old when he became king and reigned 11 years in Jerusalem, tenth day of the fifth month of the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, first year of King Evil-merodach's reign

Number of people deported and year of deportation — 3,023 Jews in Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year, 832 people from Jerusalem in Nebuchadnezzar's twenty-third year, Nebuzaradan deported 745 Jews, all together 4,600 people deported

Testable Historical Data

The Book of Jeremiah was filled with historical data that I could test. So how did Jeremiah do?

Many archaeological discoveries concerning Judah and Babylon in the time of Jeremiah were available for me to research in 1971. Archaeologists William F. Albright and M.G. Kyle excavated the site of Tell Beit Mirsim in Israel (13 miles southwest of Hebron) during the early part of the 20th century. They discovered two stamped jar-handles in upper stratum (dated to early 6th century BC) bore the seal impression – 'Belonging to Eliakim steward of Yokin.' *Yokin* is rendered Jehoiachin in the Bible. A jar handle with similar inscription was discovered in Bethshemesh in 1930 by Elihu Grant. British archaeologist J.L. Starkey excavated Tell ed-Duweir, identified as ancient Lachish, during the third decade of the 20th century. Starkey discovered potsherds with Hebrew writing from an army officer complaining about royal officials sending letters that 'weaken the hands' of the people. That is similar to what is written in Jeremiah 38:4 – "Therefore the princes said to the king, 'Please, let this man be put to death, for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war who remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man does not seek the welfare of this people, but their harm.'" The 'Lachish Letters' also include support for the town of Azekah mentioned in Jeremiah 34. Lachish Letter 1 includes a list of several names, some of which were also listed in Jeremiah –

Gemaryahu, son of Hissilyahu; Yaazanyahu, son of Tobshillem; Hageb, son of Yaazanyahu; Mibtahyahu, son of Yirmeyahu; and Mattanyahu, son of Neryahu. An archaeological dig at [Tell en-Nasbeh](#) (site of the ancient city of Mizpah) in 1932 discovered a seal listing the name of [Jaazaniah](#) as a servant of the King of Judah.

We read in Jeremiah 43 that Johanan the son of Kareah rejected the prophet Jeremiah's advice about not taking the remaining people of Judah to Egypt. They went as far as Tahpanhes when God told Jeremiah to prophecy about what would happen to them by hiding large stones in the clay in the brick courtyard at the entrance to pharaoh's house in Tahpanhes. English Egyptologist and archaeologist [Sir Flinders Petrie](#) excavated [Tell Defenneh](#) (ancient Tahpanhes) toward the end of the 19th century and discovered a large castle which may have been the pharaoh's house. The [Elephantine Papyri](#) discovered at the end of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century showed that a [Jewish community was in existence](#) at least by the early part of the 5th century BC.

Beginning in 1969 Israeli archaeologist [Nahman Avigad](#) began excavations in the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. Avigad and his team unearthed the [Israelite Tower](#) with evidence of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

I had been a Christian for a few years when about 200 inscribed bullae surfaced through an antiquities dealer in East Jerusalem. Archaeologists have dated the seals to the 6th century BC. One of the seals had the name Berekhyah son of Ner-iyahu the scribe, believed to be the same Baruch who was scribe for the prophet Jeremiah.

More recently, in 2007, Austrian Assyriologist Michael Jursa was looking through undeciphered Babylonian cuneiform tablets in the British Museum when he found a notation about a temple donation made by an official named 'Nebo-Sarsekim.' The spelling of the name was the same as the name of a Babylonian official found in Jeremiah 39. The tablet was dated about 595 BC.

Dr. Eilat Mazar with the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem excavated the summit of the City of David between 2005 and 2008. She discovered what may be the palace of King David and inside the building found clay bulla. One of the seal impressions had Hebrew lettering with the name 'Jehucal, son of Shelemiah, son of Shovi,' mentioned in Jeremiah 37:3 and 38:1. Another seal impression had the name of 'Gedaliah, son of Pashur,' another high-ranking official mentioned in Jeremiah 38:1.

Jeremiah Passed the Test

The Book of Jeremiah did quite well in the area of 'falsifiability.' I was impressed during my investigation that the ancient documents that are part of the 'Hebrew Bible' had so much historical and archaeological 'evidence' to support the claims that the Old Testament is historical rather than mythical. However, just because ancient writings can be tested and verified doesn't mean that what they claim about the 'supernatural' is true. So, the investigation continues.

Daniel

We are looking at what archaeological evidence was available in 1971 to support the writings of the Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament of the Bible. That's when I was conducting an investigation, as an atheist, into the truth claims of theism and Christianity.

We've seen evidence for the men who prophesied during the years of the kings of [Israel](#) and [Judah](#) and the evidence for [Jeremiah](#) who prophesied during the years leading up to and following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and beginning of Hebrew captivity in Babylon. Now we turn to the years of captivity.

According to secular sources, [deported Jews spent 70 years of captivity in Babylon](#) – from the beginning of forced detention in 597 BC to the end of exile in 538 BC. [One of the Babylonian Chronicles ([ABC 5](#)) details the involvement of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in capturing Jerusalem.] While King Nebuchadnezzar had many wealthy and influential Jews deported to Babylon, thousands of the poorer Jews remained in Judah or fled to nearby countries.

Two Hebrew prophets lived in Babylon during the exile period: Daniel and Ezekiel. Jeremiah remained in Judah for a time until he was forcibly moved to Egypt. What archaeological evidence do we have to support the historical references in the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel?

Let's begin with Daniel.

Archaeology

Archaeologists have discovered records of three deportations of the people from Judah to Babylon: 605 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC. The Jewish historian Josephus quoted the Greek historian Berossus concerning the campaigns of Nebuchadnezzar. Berossus lived during the 4th century BC and said he wrote the history of Babylonian kings based on numerous Babylonian historical books and chronologies available to him.

“Nabuchodonosor, as soon as he had received intelligence of his father’s death, set in order the affairs of Egypt and the other countries, and committed to some of his faithful officers the captives he had taken from the Jews, and Phœnicians, and Syrians, and the nations belonging to Egypt, that they might conduct them with that part of the forces which had heavy armour, together with the rest of his baggage, to Babylonia.” Berossus from Josephus, Sacred Texts

King Nabopolassar, who was Nebuchadnezzar’s father, died in 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar rushed back to Babylon to claim his throne in that same year and instructed his army to escort Jewish captives to Babylon – the first of the three Babylonian captivities of the Jews.

That brings us to a Hebrew youth named Daniel.

“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.” Daniel 1:1-2

Jehoiakim became king of Judah after his father, King Josiah, died and the Egyptian pharaoh Necho made Jehoikim king. That was about 608 BC. The third year of Jehoiakim's reign would have been about 606/605 BC, which is when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish and besieged Jerusalem. That's when Daniel and some of his friends were taken captive to Babylon.

“Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might

serve before the king. Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.” Daniel 1:3-7

One remarkable aspect of this event happening in 605 BC is that Isaiah prophesied it would happen a century earlier. Here’s what Isaiah told King Hezekiah (reigned approx. 715 – 686 BC):

“Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, ‘Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: ‘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,’ says the Lord. ‘And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.’” Isaiah 39:5-7

Daniel and his friends were members of the first wave of Hebrew captives to be taken to Babylon. The Babylonian who conducted them from Jerusalem to Babylon was ‘Asphenaz, the master of his eunuchs.’ The term *rabsaris* (*rab she-reshi*), ‘master of his eunuchs,’ was authenticated by an archaeological find in the late 19th century AD of a Babylonian clay tablet, dated to the early 6th century BC, currently on display in The British Museum. The prophet Jeremiah also used the same term when speaking about “princes of the king of Babylon.” (Jeremiah 39:3).

It's interesting to note that Daniel rose to become one of the 'princes of Babylon' under Nebuchadnezzar.

“As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days, when the king had said that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. Then the king interviewed them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they served before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm. Thus Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus.”
Daniel 1:17-21

“Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon. Also Daniel petitioned the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego over the affairs of the province of Babylon; but Daniel sat in the gate of the king.” Daniel 2:48-49

“Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon.” Daniel 3:30

The comments of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:30 – “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?” – are similar to the boastful words of Nebuchadnezzar engraved on an ancient Babylonian tablet (discovered in ruins of Babylong before 1801 AD) known as the ‘East India House Inscription’ on display in the British Museum in London.

One of the interesting aspects of the Book of Daniel is his use of both Hebrew and Aramaic. Aramaic was a *lingua franca* (common or bridge language used between nations) during ancient times. The Hebrew writing in Daniel is consistent with a 6th century BC dating (similar to Ezekiel’s Hebrew) and the Aramaic in Daniel is similar to the Elephantine Papyri and the imperial Aramaic of the 5th century BC. In fact, Daniel has been shown to have been “written in a form of Imperial Aramaic (*Reichsaramaisch*), an official or literary dialect which had currency in all parts of the Near East” (Archer, *Survey*, 397. Cf. Jeffery, “Book of Daniel,” 349; W. J. Martin, “Language of the Old Testament,” *NBD*; F. Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 60.). Edwin Yamauchi wrote that “Discoveries, such as Adon’s letter in Aramaic (sixth cent. B.C.), have confirmed the fact that the Aramaic of Ezra and of Daniel is basically the same as the Aramaic of the sixth-fifth centuries as we know it from contemporary evidence” (Yamauchi, *Greece and Babylon*, 91 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967). (For more information, read *The New American Commentary Volume 18: Daniel*, Stephen R. Miller, B& H Books, 1994)

Daniel changed from Hebrew to Aramaic in Daniel 2:4 – “Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, ‘O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will give the interpretation’” – and changed back to Hebrew after Daniel 7:28 – “This *is* the end of the account. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly troubled me, and my countenance changed; but I kept the matter in my heart.”

Dating Daniel to the 6th century BC is remarkable in light of the accuracy of his interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams (Daniel 2:31-45). Daniel ended the interpretation with these words – “The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.” (Daniel 2:45b) History has revealed that the first four kingdoms from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream were the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires. The fifth kingdom (feet and ten toes of statue) is thought by some scholars to be a future revived Roman empire prior to Christ’s return (Daniel 2:41-44; Revelation 17:12-14; 19:11-21).

Non-Historical?

Dr. Richard Carrier is a well-known atheist who does not believe Jesus of Nazareth was a real person. Carrier is a leading proponent of the 'origin of Christianity without a historical Jesus' (richardcarrier.info). Carrier also believes that many of the most important biblical figures were also fictional.

“The patriarchs are safely assumed now to be nonhistorical, and thus entirely mythical. This is no longer considered radical or fringe, but is in fact the most widespread mainstream view among scholars (see sources and discussion in Chapter 5, Element 44). Thus Moses is now regarded as fictional, yet like Jesus he performed miracles, had a whole family and huge numbers of followers, gave speeches and had travels, and dictated laws. No mainstream historian today believes the book of Deuteronomy was even written in the same century as Moses, much less by Moses, or that it preserves anything Moses actually said or did— yet it purports to do so, at extraordinary length and in remarkable detail. No real historian today would accept as valid an argument like ‘Moses had to have existed, because so many sayings and teachings were attributed to him!’ And yet if this argument is invalid for Moses, it’s invalid for Jesus.” Carrier, Richard, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, Kindle Edition, 2014

Dr. Carrier is not as certain about whether the Hebrew prophet Daniel actually existed, but does believe the Book of Daniel is a late work of fiction.

“Similarly, it’s now the mainstream view that the book of Daniel was written in the second century bce and is a complete fiction, representing the elaborate adventures and speeches of the sixth-century prophet Daniel as if they were a fact (see sources and discussion in Chapter 4, Element 7). Historians doubt even the existence of Daniel. But even if he existed, historians are certain the book of Daniel does not contain anything he authentically said or did. Rather, this Daniel, and everything he is supposed to have said and done, was invented to create a historical authority for a new vision of society, to inspire a new unity and a new moral order against the immoral rule of dominating foreigners.” Carrier, Richard, On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt, Sheffield Phoenix Press, Kindle Edition, 2014

I believed the same thing a few years before Dr. Carrier was born (1969), so these ideas about figures in the Bible not being historical and their writings being made up by unidentified people centuries after the supposed historical dating are nothing new to me. I was a loud, mocking atheist with a radio talk show in a major metropolitan area 46 years ago ... so what happened to me?

What happened to me has happened to many atheists who laid aside their biases long enough to look at the evidence for the historicity of the Hebrew prophets – including Daniel.

We looked at the archaeological support for the three deportations of the people of Judah to Babylon at the end of the 7th century and early part of the 6th century B.C. We also looked at the dating of the Book of Daniel based on the use of both Hebrew and Aramaic in the text. The Hebrew writing in Daniel has been found to be consistent with a 6th century B.C. dating and the Aramaic writing in Daniel has been found to be similar to the Elephantine Papyri of the imperial Aramaic of the 5th century B.C. Edwin Yamauchi wrote that “Discoveries, such as Adon’s letter in Aramaic (sixth cent. B.C.), have confirmed the fact that the Aramaic of Ezra and of Daniel is basically the same as the Aramaic of the sixth-fifth centuries as we know it from contemporary evidence” (Yamauchi, *Greece and Babylon*, 91 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967). (For more information, read [*The New American Commentary Volume 18: Daniel*](#), Stephen R. Miller, B& H Books, 1994)

Questions about the dating of Daniel go back as far as the 3rd century A.D. [Porphyry](#) was a philosopher and student of Plotinus. Porphyry wrote a series of books titled *Against the Christians*. Jerome included some of Porphyry’s claims that Daniel had to have been written during the early to mid-2nd century B.C. because of the accuracy of Daniel’s prophecy concerning the time of Antiochus Epiphanes.

“Porphyry wrote his twelfth book against the prophecy of Daniel, (A) denying that it was composed by the person to whom it is ascribed in its title, but rather by some individual living in Judaea at the time of the Antiochus who was surnamed Epiphanes. He furthermore alleged that “Daniel” did not foretell the future so much as he related the past, and lastly that whatever he spoke of up till the time of Antiochus contained authentic history, whereas anything he may have conjectured beyond that point was false, inasmuch as he would not have foreknown the future. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, made a most able reply to these allegations in three volumes, that is, the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth. Appollinarius did likewise, in a single large book, namely his twenty-sixth. (B) Prior to these authors Methodius made a partial reply.” St. Jerome, Commentary on Daniel, Translated by Gleason L. Archer, 1958

Responses to Porphyry’s writings by about 30 Christian apologists and the burning of his books by Emperor Theodosius II ended the idea of a late dating of Daniel .. until the 17th century German literary critics began attacking the Book of Daniel and promoting an anonymous authorship during the time of the Maccabees. That was the dominant view of Daniel when I was investigating theism and the reliability of the Bible in 1971.

Daniel and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The oldest known texts from the Book of Daniel were discovered as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls, including hundreds of biblical and non-biblical scrolls and fragments, were discovered between 1947 and 1956 in 11 caves that were part of the ancient Qumran community. The caves are located along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea several miles east of Jerusalem. Eight biblical manuscripts of Daniel were discovered in the caves and many scholars wrote about the findings during the 1950s and 60s. In addition to the already mentioned language issues (Hebrew and Aramaic), scholars also raised the issue of dating based on the Qumran community accepting Daniel as canonical (part of the Canon of the Hebrew Bible) by the middle of the 2nd century B.C. Some scholars (e.g. Professor Randall K. Harrison – *Dead Sea Scrolls: An Introduction*, 1961; *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1969) believed that Daniel's canonical status in mid-2nd century B.C. is evidence that Daniel was written many years earlier in order for it to have been accepted as canonical.

The apocryphal 1 Maccabees dates to the latter part of the 2nd century B.C. The writer quotes Mattathias ben Johanan speaking to his sons just before he died in 166 B.C. The quote concerns the Maccabees' ancestors and mentions Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah and other biblical characters, including Daniel and his friends – “Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were saved from the flames because they had faith. Daniel was a man of integrity, and

the Lord rescued him from the mouth of the lions. Take each of these ancestors of ours as an example, and you will realize that no one who puts his trust in the Lord will ever lack strength.” (1 Maccabees 2:59-61) The argument from conservative scholars is that the testimony of a priest and leader of the Jewish people in the middle of the 2nd century B.C. concerning the history of the Hebrew people from the Book of Daniel is more evidence that Daniel was written long before the time of the Maccabees' battles with Antiochus IV Epiphanes (reigned 175-164 B.C.).

Why It Matters

The reason the actual dating of the Book of Daniel matters is because of Daniel's visions and prophecies found in the second half of the Book (Chapters 7 – 12). If Daniel wrote this book about events he personally experienced during his years of living in Babylon from the end of the 7th century to the latter part of the 6th century B.C. (605-525 B.C.), then an important question has to be asked and answered: how did a human being predict kingdoms and events centuries in the future? Could the answer be as simple as what we read in Daniel 9:22-23 from the angel Gabriel?

“O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision.”

The early visions and dreams in Daniel (Chapters 1 – 4) had to do with the future of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon and other world powers. Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's first dream (Chapter 2) moved Daniel and his Hebrew friends into positions of influence in the Babylonian government. Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's second dream (Chapter 4) concerned how the king would experience a period of temporary insanity until he knew "that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (Daniel 4:25). Daniel interpreted the supernatural writing on the wall of a royal banquet and predicted that the Medes and Persians would conquer Babylon (Chapter 5). Daniel became a leader in the new government and ruled with both Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian (Chapter 6). The later prophetic visions (Chapters 7-12) concerned how future events would affect the Jewish people.

These are remarkable claims from an ancient writing. Even if the archaeological evidence was strong enough to support the Book of Daniel dating to the 6th century B.C., were there any other archaeological finds that would back up the historical claims? We'll look at those in the next part of our investigation.

Belshazzar

The Book of Daniel is one of the most contested writings in the Bible. Atheists understand the significance of Daniel and attack it with regularity.

Here's a note on the [Secular Web](#) about Daniel:

“The prophecies of the Book of Daniel have fascinated readers and created controversy for the past two thousand years. Evangelical Christians believe that the prophet Daniel, an official in the courts of Near-Eastern emperors in the sixth century BC, foretold the future of the world from his own time to the end of the age. Actually, the book was written in Palestine in the mid-second century BC by an author who expected God to set up his everlasting kingdom in his own near future, as we read in the mainline commentaries and Bible dictionaries.

We pointed out in [our last article](#) that many atheists attack Daniel as being written centuries after King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and King Cyrus of Persia actually ruled. They know that a late dating of Daniel would bring Daniel's visions and prophecies into question and would also cause problems with the New Testament texts where Jesus uses the term 'Son of Man' (from Daniel 7:13) for Himself.

I would have agreed with atheists 45 years ago when I was also an atheist. However, that was before I looked into the evidence for the historical accuracy of the Book of Daniel.

What's In A Name?

“Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand.” Daniel 5:1

The name ‘Belshazzar’ is an interesting one as we look into Babylonian history. As pointed out by the Encyclopedia Britannica:

“Belshazzar had been known only from the biblical Book of Daniel (chapters 5, 7–8) and from Xenophon’s Cyropaedia until 1854, when references to him were found in Babylonian cuneiform inscriptions.” Belshazzar – King of Babylonia, Encyclopedia Britannica

Ancient historians (e.g. Berossus, Polyhistor) listed Nabonidus as the last king of Babylon with no mention of Belshazzar. It wasn’t until almost two thousand years later that archaeologists found evidence that the Bible’s listing of Belshazzar as a king of Babylon was correct.

British archaeologist John George Taylor worked in Iraq in the middle of the 19th century on behalf of the British Museum. Taylor discovered clay cylinders at the ancient ruins at Tell el-Muqayyar (Ur). Nabonidus mentions his son Belshazzar by name on the

cylinder:

“As for me, Nabonidus, king of Babylon, save me from sinning against your great godhead and grant me as a present a life long of days, and as for Belshazzar, the eldest son -my offspring- instill reverence for your great godhead in his heart and may he not commit any cultic mistake, may he be sated with a life of plenitude.” The Nabonidus Cylinder from Ur

Assyriologist [Hormuzd Rassam](#), who was born in Mosul, Iraq (Ottoman Mesopotamia) in the early 19th century spent much of his career working for the British Museum. One of his crowning achievements was excavating the temple of the sun god Shamash in the city of Sippar (in southern Iraq) where he discovered about 50-thousand cylinders and tablets. One of the cylinders became known as the [Cylinder of Nabonidus](#). It's dated to about 555-540 BC. Nabonidus details his time away from Babylon to rebuild pagan temples in Harran. This is supported by a 6th century BC cuneiform tablet known as the [Nabonidus Chronicle](#). It 'chronicles' the king's activities during his reign and shows that Nabonidus spent many years in Tema while 'the crown prince' was in 'Akkad' (Babylon?) with his officials and army. The fact that the king's officials and army were with the crown prince is more evidence that Belshazzar was in a position of co-regeancy with his father.

Belshazzar's position as the number 2 in the kingdom would explain why he offered the interpreter of the *writing on the wall* the position of 'the third ruler in the kingdom' (Daniel 5:7). However, that raises the question about why Daniel never mentioned King Nabonidus. A simple explanation may be that Daniel didn't mention Nabonidus because Nabonidus was not involved in the event Daniel described. From what we read in the Nabonidus Chronicle, Nabonidus lived in Tema for most of his 17-year reign. Tema was located hundreds of miles southwest of Babylon and the Chronicle related how Nabonidus did not go to Babylon often. He missed many of the official and religious ceremonies during those years. Belshazzar, the 'crown prince,' was with the king's 'officials and his army' and would have acted officially in his father's stead.

An ancient text known as the Persian "[Verse Account of Nabonidus](#)" (dated to the latter part of the 6th century BC) states that Nabonidus entrusted his army and 'kingship' to his oldest son [Belshazzar] and marched a long distance on a path to a distant region 'deep in the west.' The Verse Account goes on to say that Nabonidus killed the 'prince of Tem' and took possession of the area. The text says Nabonidus 'made the town beautiful' and 'built there a palace like the palace in Babylon.'

Based on the evidence found in the various 'chronicles,' it would seem that Belshazzar would have been the ruler that most people in Babylon would have known on a daily basis since Nabonidus lived hundreds of miles away and rarely returned to Babylon.

Here's a question that seems to be in favor of Daniel writing the Book of Daniel in the latter part of the 6th century BC. Since Belshazzar was not listed on any known Babylonian 'kings list,' how would someone living in the 2nd century BC know to list him as a king in the 6th century? The most plausible explanation seems to be that the author of Daniel knew about Belshazzar because he actually lived during the 6th century BC.

What about Daniel's statement that Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's 'father'?

"While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them." Daniel 5:2

We've already seen that Nabonidus was Belshazzar's father, so how could Nebuchadnezzar also be his father?

Archaeologists have found that the Babylonian King List dates back as far back as the early Amorite city-states to the middle part of the 20th century BC and is related to its predecessor known as the Sumerian King List. The Babylonian Empire began in the Middle Bronze Age (MBA) during the latter part of the 19th century BC. Nabonidus and Belshazzar ruled at the end of the 11th Dynasty, often referred to as the Neo-Babylonian (also known as Chaldean and

Akkadian Dynasty).

[Nabopolassar](#) took control of Babylonia from the Assyrian King about 626 BC. The [Chronicle Concerning the Early Years of Nabopolassar](#) (ABC 2) and the [Chronicle Concerning the Late Years of Nabopolassar](#) (ABC 4) detail his years as King of Babylon. [Cuneiform Tablet ME 21901](#) in The British Museum summarizes many of the events concerning Nabopolassar's time as king.

[Nebuchadnezzar](#), the son of Nabopolassar, became king after his father died in 605 BC. [Amel-Marduk](#), son of Nebuchadnezzar, became king after his father died in 562 BC. Babylonian priest and historian [Berosus](#) wrote that Amel-Marduk was murdered in a plot by his brother-in-law [Neriglissar](#). Neriglissar died four years later and his young son [Labashi-Marduk](#) became king, but was quickly overthrown by Nabonidus.

Even though the time from when Nebuchadnezzar died (562 BC) to when Nabonidus became king (556 BC) was only six years, the question remains why Daniel would write that Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's 'father.'

We know from archaeological discoveries that Nabonidus was Belshazzar's father, but who was Belshazzar's mother? Some scholars (***) believe that a woman named Nitocris may have been the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, wife of Nabonidus and mother of Belshazzar. If that's true, then Nebuchadnezzar would have been Belshazzar's grandfather. It was common in ancient times to refer to

a grandfather, great-grandfather or even more distant ancestor as someone's 'father.'

This is particularly interesting in light of Jeremiah's prophecy during the 7th century BC that many nations (including Judah) and great kings (including Jehoiachin) would serve Nebuchadnezzar 'and his son and his son's son.' That could very well have meant Belshazzar, whose father may have been the son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 27:1-11)

** Raymond Philip Dougherty was the William M. Laffan Professor of Assyriology and Babylonian Literature at Yale University. His specific area of expertise was the Neo-Babylonian era, including its history and cuneiform documents. Professor Dougherty wrote a book in 1929 called *Nabonidus and Belshazzar, a Study of the Closing Events of the Neo-Babylonian Empire* (Yale University Press). On page 43 of the book, Dougherty wrote this:

“Enough evidence has been presented to make it apparent (a) that the Labynetus of Herodotus was Nabonidus, (b) that Nitocris was the wife of Nabonidus, and (c) that their son was a man of authority in the kingdom. Considerations of strong corroborative value may be presented. “

We will read more about the part Nitocris may have played in Daniel's account as we continue our investigation – *Convince Me There's A God*.

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