# DUG UP AND WRITTEN DOWN

*How Archaeology, History, and Science Confirm the Bible, From the First Finds to Today*



*From the Dead Sea Scrolls to the latest finds of 2026, what the evidence shows about the Bible*

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TRINFINITY
Enterprises

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Andrew Dominguez

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This book offers Bible teaching and history. Its chapters on health describe history and the Bible, not medical advice. Ask your doctor about any health question.

**A note before you begin.** This book is written to teach the Bible and encourage faith. It shares my understanding of Scripture and is offered for study and spiritual growth. It is not counseling, medical, legal, or financial advice. If you are facing a crisis, a health problem, or a legal or money problem, please reach out to a qualified professional as well as your pastor and church family. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no liability for how this material is used.

# A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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# Before You Begin

> *it seemed good to me also, having followed all things carefully from the first, to write to you in order, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may come to know the certainty concerning the words in which you were instructed.*
>
> Luke 1:3-4 (SLB)

Maybe someone has asked you this over lunch, or at a family dinner, or in a comment online: "How do you know any of that stuff actually happened?" A lot of Christians don't have a good answer. We have a few things we've heard in sermons, like "they found Noah's ark" or "science proves the Bible," and we aren't sure any of them are true.

I translated the Steadfast Literal Bible, and that work makes you pay close attention to details you can check. The Bible does not read like myth. It names real kings, real towns and real rulers. I wrote this book for readers with honest questions about whether the Bible holds up when you put a shovel in the ground. Real history has nothing to fear from careful checking.

So I went digging, the way you would dig into any claim at work. Where did this come from? Who found it? When? Who published it? Do other experts agree, or is this one person's idea? What I found surprised me. Some of the stories I had heard were wrong, and I had to throw them out. But the real evidence, the kind that holds up in a museum and in a scholarly journal, was far stronger than I expected. Kings I had read about in my Bible turned up carved in stone by their enemies. Cities that critics once called legends turned out to be real places with real walls. A man named in the Gospels as the high priest who handed Jesus over turned up on his family's bone box. And the copies of the Bible we hold today turned out to match copies a thousand years older than anyone once had.

This book is what I found. It runs from the earliest discoveries, made almost two hundred years ago, right up to finds announced in 2026.

## What This Book Does

This book looks at the evidence that the Bible's history is real. It covers five kinds of evidence.

- **The text itself.** How do we know the Bible we read today is what was first written? We look at the ancient copies, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the earliest pieces of the New Testament.
- **People and places of the Old Testament.** Noah and the flood stories of the ancient world, plus kings, cities, wars, and officials named in the Bible that have turned up in the ground and in the records of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.
- **People and places of the New Testament.** Pilate, Caiaphas, the Pool of Siloam, Nazareth, and the cities Paul visited, plus what writers outside the Bible said about Jesus and the evidence that the Gospels come from eyewitnesses.
- **Health and the natural world.** The laws of Moses on washing, quarantine, and waste, written thousands of years before anyone knew germs existed, and what the Bible says about the universe, the stars, and the sea.

- **The latest finds.** What archaeologists have found and published from 2020 through 2026.

## How Strong Is Each Piece of Evidence?

Here is something you won't hear from a lot of Christian books on this subject: not every claim holds up the same way. Some finds are rock solid. Some are good but still argued over. A few that you may have heard about in church turned out to be wrong, or were never real to begin with.

I don't think that hurts the case for the Bible one bit. It helps it. When skeptics see a Christian book repeat a story that was disproved years ago, they stop reading, and they are right to. When they see that we tell the truth even when it costs us a good story, they keep reading.

So for every major find in this book, I give you an **Evidence check** with one of four ratings.

| Rating | What it means |
|---|---|
| **Confirmed** | The object is real, its date is settled, and nearly all experts agree on what it says. Example: the Tel Dan Stele names the "House of David." |
| **Strong** | Most experts accept it, but some details are still argued. Example: the Pool of Siloam found in 2004 is the pool from John 9. |
| **Debated** | Serious scholars disagree, and the evidence could go either way. Example: the exact date of the fall of Jericho. |
| **Not supported** | The claim was tested and failed, or was never good evidence. Example: the claim that someone found Noah's ark on a mountain in Turkey. |

## What Evidence Can and Cannot Do

I want to be honest about one more thing before we start. Archaeology can show that a king lived, that a city stood, that a war was fought, and that a tunnel was dug. It can show that the people who wrote the Bible knew what they were talking about. It cannot dig up a miracle. No shovel will ever find the moment the Red Sea parted, and no lab can test whether Jesus rose from the dead.

What evidence can do is show that the Bible is the kind of book you can trust. When a writer gets the names, the places, the titles, and the politics right, over and over, across hundreds of years, you have good reason to trust him on the parts you can't check. That is how we treat any other ancient book, and it is all I ask you to do with this one.

## A Few Notes Before We Start

Scripture quotations in this book come from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). Words set in bold italics inside a quotation are words added in English to make the sentence read clearly. When I don't quote a passage, I give the reference so you can read it for yourself.

I capitalize the pronouns that refer to God and Jesus (He, Him, His, You, Your) as a sign of reverence. Inside quotations from other writers, I leave their words exactly as they wrote them.

Dates are given as B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (Latin *anno Domini*, "in the year of the Lord"). Many scholars write BCE and CE instead. The numbers are the same.

When I say a find was “published,” I mean an expert wrote it up in a journal or official report where other experts could check it. That matters. A news story or a video is not the same thing. In the back of the book you will find a list of sources for every major find, so you can check my work. Please do. The Bereans did that with Paul (Acts 17:11), and he praised them for it.

Every chapter ends with **Study Questions** for personal reflection or group discussion.

# Part One: Weighing the Evidence

# Chapter 1: How Archaeologists Know What They Know

*The first in his case **is** righteous, and his neighbor comes and examines him.*

Proverbs 18:17 (SLB)

Before we look at a single stone or scroll, you need to know how the people who dig these things up decide what they have found and how old it is. If you skip this chapter, a lot of the rest of the book will sound like "experts say so." I don't want you to take anyone's word for it, mine included. So let's look under the hood.

## A Tell Is a Layer Cake

Most of the cities in the Bible stood on hills, and many of those hills are not natural. They are called a *tell* (Arabic *tall*, Hebrew *tel*), which is a mound built up from city after city stacked on top of each other. People built a town. An army burned it, or an earthquake knocked it down. The next people leveled the rubble and built on top. Over a thousand years or more, the mound rose higher and higher.

That is why you see place names in Israel like Tel Dan, Tel Megiddo, and Tel Lachish. The Bible even uses the word. Joshua 8:28 says Joshua burned Ai "and made it a mound forever." The Hebrew word for "mound" there is *tel*.

Archaeologists dig a tell from the top down, one layer at a time. Each layer is called a *stratum* (plural *strata*). The basic rule is simple: the deeper the layer, the older it is, unless someone dug a pit or a foundation down into an older layer. Reading those layers is called *stratigraphy*. It is the backbone of the whole field.

## Pottery Is the Clock

Here is a fact that surprises people. The most important thing an archaeologist finds is not gold or statues. It is broken pottery.

Pottery was cheap, it broke all the time, and the pieces (called *sherds*) never rot. Styles of pottery changed over time the way car styles change. A trained eye can look at the rim of a cooking pot and say, "That's from the 900s B.C.," much like you could look at a tail fin and say, "That's a 1959 Cadillac." Sir Flinders Petrie worked out the first pottery timeline in Egypt and Palestine in the late 1800s, and it has been refined ever since.

Pottery dating gives you a range, usually within a century or so. It is good, but it is not exact. That is why you will often see two experts look at the same layer and argue over whether it belongs to the time of Solomon or a hundred years later.

## Radiocarbon Dating

Every living thing takes in carbon, including a small amount of a radioactive kind called carbon-14. When the plant or animal dies, the carbon-14 slowly breaks down at a known rate. Measure how much is left, and you can tell how long ago it died.

For Bible archaeology, the best samples are short-lived things like seeds, olive pits, grain, and twigs, because they died the same year they grew. A wooden beam is less useful, because the tree may have been cut down long before the building went up.

Radiocarbon dating has gotten much more precise in the last twenty years. In 2024, a team from the Weizmann Institute of Science, the Israel Antiquities Authority, and Tel Aviv University published more than one hundred radiocarbon dates from the City of David in Jerusalem. They used tree rings with known calendar dates to correct a known weak spot in the method. We will look at what they found in Chapter 10.

## Reading the Writing

When a find has writing on it, experts can often date it by the shape of the letters. This is called *paleography* (pay-lee-OG-ruh-fee). Handwriting changed over time, just like pottery. The Hebrew letters on a seal from the 700s B.C. look different from the letters on a scroll from the 100s B.C.

In 2025, a team led by Mladen Popovic at the University of Groningen trained a computer program on the handwriting of Dead Sea Scrolls that had been dated by radiocarbon. Then they let the program estimate the age of other scrolls. Experts judged its estimates realistic about 79 percent of the time. It is a new tool, and experts are still testing it, but it is one more way to cross-check a date.

## Outside Records Are Gold

The strongest evidence of all comes when a king or event in the Bible shows up in the records of another nation. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Persians kept royal records on stone and clay. They had no reason to make Israel's kings look good. When an Assyrian king carves the name of a king of Israel into a monument to brag that he made him pay tribute, that is an outside witness. Historians call it *independent attestation*, which just means a second, separate source.

## Absence of Evidence

One more principle, and it matters a lot. If archaeologists haven't found something, that doesn't prove it never existed. Only a tiny part of any ancient site has ever been dug. Many sites have never been touched at all. And many things simply don't survive. Wood rots. Tents and leather disappear. Mud brick melts back into mud.

For many years, some scholars said King David was a legend because no inscription named him. Then, in 1993, one turned up at Tel Dan (Chapter 8). The silence was never proof. It was just silence.

But I want to be fair. This principle cuts both ways. Christians can't say, "You haven't found it yet, so it must be there." Where the evidence is thin, we should say so. And that is what I will do in this book.

## Two Camps

You should know that scholars who study the Bible's history fall roughly into two camps, with a lot of people in between.

**Minimalists** start from doubt. They tend to treat the Bible's history as mostly late legend unless outside evidence proves otherwise. Some of them once argued that David and Solomon were made up centuries later.

**Maximalists** start from trust. They tend to treat the Bible as a reliable source unless evidence shows it is wrong.

I am going to be upfront: I am in the second camp. I believe the Bible is the Word of God. But I will try to give you the facts in a way that a fair-minded person from either camp would accept, and I will tell you when I am giving you my own view.

## The Rule That Matters Most

Here is the question I want you to ask about every find in this book: *Who found it, where, and how do we know it is real?*

An object dug up by a licensed team, in a known layer, with its pottery and its neighbors, is strong evidence. An object that showed up on the antiquities market, with no record of where it came from, is weak evidence, no matter how exciting it looks. Experts call the record of where an object came from its *provenance* (PROV-uh-nuns). Some famous "Bible finds" turned out to be forgeries, and almost all of them came from the market, not from a dig. We will look at several in Chapter 24.

## Study Questions

1. What is a tell, and why do the deepest layers usually hold the oldest remains?
2. Why is broken pottery so useful for dating?
3. Why is an Assyrian king's inscription naming a king of Israel such strong evidence?
4. What does "absence of evidence" mean, and how can it be misused by both skeptics and believers?
5. Read Proverbs 18:17. How does that verse apply to weighing claims about the Bible?

# Chapter 2: A Book That Invites Checking

> *For not having followed cleverly devised myths did we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but having become eyewitnesses of His majesty.*
>
> 2 Peter 1:16 (SLB)

Most religious books don't give you much to check. They tell you about visions, inner truths, or the deeds of gods in a time before time. You can't dig any of that up.

The Bible is different. It puts its stories in real places, at real times, under real kings. It names governors, high priests, generals, and officials. It tells you which king was on the throne when a prophet spoke, and in which year of his reign. It gives you the names of towns, valleys, springs, and roads. In other words, the Bible sticks its neck out. If it were made up, it would be easy to catch.

In my work, every report has to tie back to facts you can check. Luke 3:1-2 reads the same way. Luke anchors his account to named rulers and exact offices. A writer making up a legend avoids names that anyone could check. Luke wrote like a careful investigator who expected his readers to check his work.

## Dated Like a Newspaper

Look at how the prophet Isaiah dates his famous vision of the Lord.

> *In the year of the death of King Uzziah, and I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and His skirts were filling the temple.* (Isaiah 6:1)

King Uzziah was a real king of Judah. His death can be dated to the 700s B.C., and as we will see in Chapter 10, a recent radiocarbon study in Jerusalem points to building work in his day.

The prophet Amos does the same thing. He dates his message "two years before the earthquake" (Amos 1:1). That earthquake was so big that people still talked about it 250 years later (Zechariah 14:5). Geologists and archaeologists have found evidence of a major earthquake in the 700s B.C. at sites like Hazor and Gezer, and the 2024 Jerusalem study used an earthquake layer from that century as one of its fixed points.

Luke is even more careful. Look at how he sets the stage for John the Baptist.

> *Now in **the** fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, while Pontius Pilate was governing Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and Philip his brother was tetrarch of Iturea and **the** region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the time of **the** high priests Annas and Caiaphas, a declaration of God came upon John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* (Luke 3:1-2)

That is seven rulers in two verses. Tiberius Caesar is famous. Pontius Pilate turned up on a stone in 1961 (Chapter 16). Annas and Caiaphas are in Josephus, and Caiaphas's family bone box turned up in 1990. Even Lysanias, an obscure ruler of a small region north of Galilee, is named on an inscription found at

Abila in Syria. Luke wasn't writing a fairy tale that starts with "once upon a time." He was writing history, and he wanted you to know it.

## Eyewitnesses

The apostles made it clear that they were not passing along myths. Peter said they had not "followed cleverly devised myths," but were "eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). John opened his first letter with the same claim.

> *That which was from **the** beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we looked upon and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life—*
> (1 John 1:1)

Paul, writing to the church at Corinth about A.D. 55, listed the people who saw Jesus alive after His death, and then added a remarkable line: most of the more than five hundred people who saw Him at one time were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6). In plain words, Paul was saying, "Go ask them." You don't say that about a story you made up.

## What Christians Have Always Believed About This

Christians have never believed that faith means believing things without reason. Faith in the Bible is trust in a God who has acted in history. The resurrection is either a fact or it is not. Paul put it bluntly: "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching ***is*** empty, and your faith also ***is*** empty" (1 Corinthians 15:14).

That is why evidence matters. Not because we are hoping archaeology will save our faith, but because the Bible itself tells us that what it says really happened.

## How the Skeptics Changed Their Minds

For about a hundred years, from the middle of the 1800s into the early 1900s, many European scholars doubted large parts of the Bible's history. Some doubted the Hittites ever existed, because no other ancient source seemed to mention them. Some doubted that Belshazzar was ever a king of Babylon. Some doubted that writing was common enough in Moses' day for him to have written anything.

One by one, those doubts were answered by the shovel. The Hittite capital turned up in Turkey, with thousands of clay tablets (Chapter 6). Belshazzar's name turned up on a clay cylinder at Ur (Chapter 11). Writing turned out to be far older than Moses.

I don't want to overstate this. Archaeology has not answered every question, and there are still real debates, which I will show you. But the overall direction of discovery for the last two hundred years has been toward the Bible, not away from it.

## Sir William Ramsay

One famous example is Sir William Ramsay (1851-1939), a Scottish scholar who spent years traveling through Turkey studying the roads, cities, and inscriptions of the Roman world. Ramsay wrote that he

began his work believing the Book of Acts was written long after the events and was not reliable history. His years of fieldwork changed his mind. He came to regard Luke as a first-rate historian, careful about the titles of local officials, the borders of provinces, and the routes of travel. He laid out his reasons in books such as *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (1895) and *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1915).

Some modern scholars think Ramsay overstated his case on a few points. That's fair. But many of the details he checked still hold up, and we will look at some of them in Chapter 17.

## Study Questions

1. Why does it matter that the Bible names real kings, places, and dates?
2. Read Luke 3:1-2. How many rulers does Luke name? What does that tell you about the kind of book he was writing?
3. Why would Paul tell his readers that most of the five hundred witnesses were still alive?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 15:14. Why can't Christianity be separated from history?
5. What doubts about the Bible were answered by later discoveries?

# Part Two: The Book Itself

# Chapter 3: The Old Testament Text: From the Dead Sea Scrolls to Today

*Grass dries up, a flower withers, and the word of our God will stand forever.*

Isaiah 40:8 (SLB)

Before we ask whether the Bible's history is true, we need to answer a more basic question. How do we know the Bible we read today says what the original writers wrote? Nobody has the original scrolls of Moses or Isaiah. They wore out long ago. What we have are copies of copies.

That sounds like a game of telephone, where a message gets passed down a line of people and comes out garbled at the end. But that is not how it worked, and we can prove it, because we have copies from very different times that we can lay side by side.

## The Masoretes

For most of history, the oldest complete Hebrew Bibles anyone had came from a group of Jewish scribes called the *Masoretes* (MASS-oh-reets), who worked from about A.D. 500 to 1000. The word comes from a Hebrew word for "tradition." Their job was to copy the Scriptures exactly, and they were fanatics about it in the best sense of the word. They counted the letters and words of each book. They noted the middle letter of the Torah. They wrote notes in the margins flagging unusual spellings so no later copyist would "fix" them.

Two of their manuscripts are still the backbone of the Hebrew Bible today. The **Aleppo Codex** was written around A.D. 930. Part of it was lost in 1947, but most survives in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The **Leningrad Codex**, now in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, is dated A.D. 1008 or 1009. It is the oldest complete Hebrew Bible in existence. (A *codex* is a book with pages, as opposed to a scroll.)

Here was the problem the skeptics raised. Isaiah wrote in the 700s B.C. The Leningrad Codex was copied about A.D. 1008. That is a gap of about 1,700 years. How could anyone know what happened to the text in all that time?

## A Shepherd and a Cave

In the winter of 1946 to 1947, a Bedouin shepherd boy named Muhammad edh-Dhib was looking for a lost goat near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, at a place called Qumran. He threw a rock into a cave and heard pottery break. Inside were clay jars holding old scrolls.

Over the next ten years, archaeologists and Bedouin searched eleven caves around Qumran and found the remains of about 900 scrolls. Roughly a quarter of them are copies of books of the Hebrew Bible. Every book of the Old Testament is represented except Esther, though many only by small fragments. (Nehemiah turns up only if you count it with Ezra, as ancient Jews did.)

The most famous of them is the **Great Isaiah Scroll**, known to scholars as 1QIsa*a*. It is 24 feet long and contains all 66 chapters of Isaiah. It was copied around 125 B.C., give or take a few decades. Overnight, the oldest copy of Isaiah jumped back by about 1,100 years.

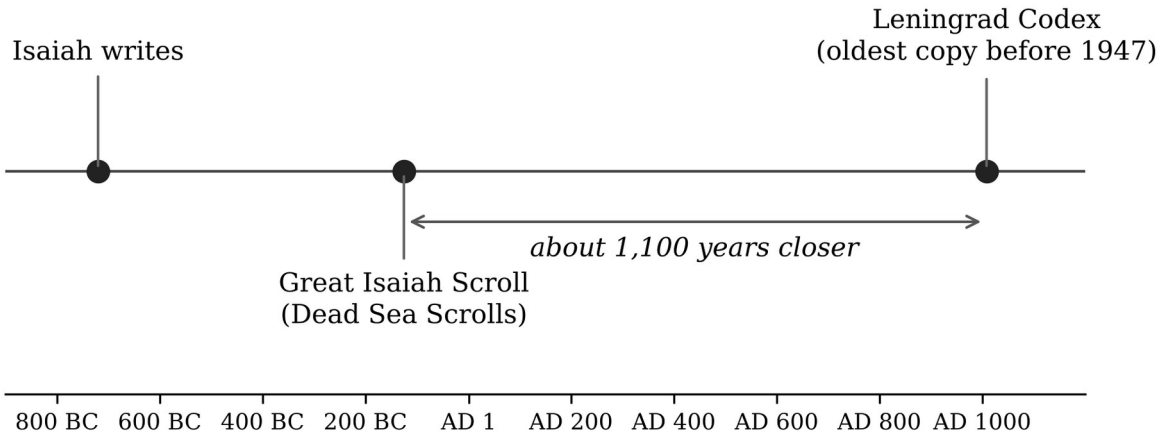



*Figure 1. How the Dead Sea Scrolls closed the gap for Isaiah*

## What the Scrolls Showed

So what happened when scholars laid the Great Isaiah Scroll beside the Masoretic text? The two are remarkably close. Most of the differences are spelling, small words like "and," or slips of the pen that are easy to spot. The message of Isaiah, chapter after chapter, is the same.

Take Isaiah 53, the great chapter about the Suffering Servant that Christians have always read as a prophecy of Jesus.

> *And He **was** pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the chastening of our peace **was** on Him, and by His wound **there** was healing for us.* (Isaiah 53:5)

Skeptics sometimes suggested Christians had reshaped chapters like this. The Great Isaiah Scroll was copied more than a century before Jesus was born, and Isaiah 53 is there, with the same message. One small but interesting difference: in verse 11, the scroll and the Greek Septuagint both include the word "light" ("He will see light"), which the Masoretic text lacks. Many modern translations follow the scroll there. That is how the scrolls help. They don't overturn the text. They sharpen it.

## Not Every Scroll Is Identical

I want to give you the whole picture, not just the best part. The Dead Sea Scrolls also show that more than one form of some books was being copied in those days. Some copies of Jeremiah, for example, are shorter and match the Greek Septuagint more closely than the Masoretic text. Some copies of Samuel include a few extra lines not found in later Hebrew Bibles.

Scholars still discuss what this means. But notice what it does *not* mean. It does not mean the Bible was made up late or changed into something else. The same books, with the same people, the same history,

and the same message, were being copied and read two centuries before Jesus. The differences are the kind you can study and weigh, and modern Bible translators do exactly that.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.* The Dead Sea Scrolls are genuine, they date mostly from about 250 B.C. to A.D. 68, and they show that the Hebrew Bible was carefully preserved for more than a thousand years.

## New Tools for Old Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are still giving up their secrets.

In 2025, a team led by Mladen Popovic of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands published a study in the journal *PLOS One*. They cleaned samples from about 30 scrolls, radiocarbon dated them, and then trained a computer program they named "Enoch" to estimate dates from the handwriting. One of the results was a fragment of Daniel known as 4Q114, which the program dated to between about 230 and 160 B.C. That fits what older experts had said from the handwriting, and it means that copy of Daniel was made very early. (Christopher Rollston of George Washington University, an expert on ancient writing, called the study interesting but "not Earth-shattering," and cautioned against reading too much into the tool. That's fair. It is one more tool, not the final word.)

In 2015, scientists at the University of Kentucky used a computer scan to "unroll" a charred scroll found in 1970 in the ruins of a synagogue at En-Gedi, on the west shore of the Dead Sea. The scroll was burned to a lump of charcoal. No one could open it without destroying it. The scan showed the opening chapters of Leviticus, with a text identical in its consonants to the Masoretic text we use today. Many experts date the scroll to around A.D. 300, though some argue for an earlier date.

In 2021, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced new fragments of a Greek scroll of the Twelve Minor Prophets, including parts of Zechariah and Nahum, from the Cave of Horror in the Judean Desert. They come from the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt (A.D. 132 to 135). It was the first new biblical scroll fragments found in an excavation in about sixty years.

## Older Still: The Silver Scrolls

The oldest piece of Scripture text ever found is not a scroll at all. In 1979, archaeologist Gabriel Barkay was digging in burial caves at a place called Ketef Hinnom, on the hillside across the Hinnom Valley from Jerusalem's Old City. Under a collapsed ceiling, his team found two tiny rolled-up silver plaques, small enough to wear around the neck.

It took years to unroll them safely. When they were finally read, they contained a form of the priestly blessing from the Book of Numbers.

> *"May the LORD bless you, and may He keep you; may the LORD make His face shine toward you, and may He be gracious to you; may the LORD lift up His face toward you, and may He set peace for you."'* (Numbers 6:24-26)

A new study in 2004, using high-resolution photography, dated the silver scrolls to around 600 B.C., just before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. That is about four hundred years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Some scholars point out, fairly, that the silver scrolls prove the blessing was in use before the exile, not that the whole Book of Numbers was written by then. That's true. But they do something else. Some critics once argued that the books of Moses were mostly written after the exile, in the 500s or 400s B.C. Here is a line from those books, worn by a family in Jerusalem before the exile even began.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.* The Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls are genuine, were found in a controlled dig, and are on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

## The Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch

Two more witnesses help us check the Hebrew text.

The **Septuagint** (sep-TOO-uh-jint) is the Greek translation of the Old Testament made by Jewish scholars in Egypt, beginning with the books of Moses in the 200s B.C. Its name comes from the Latin word for seventy, after a tradition that seventy-two scholars made the translation. It was the Bible of many Greek-speaking Jews in Jesus' day, and the New Testament writers often quoted it.

The **Samaritan Pentateuch** is the Samaritans' own copy of the five books of Moses, preserved separately from the Jewish line for more than two thousand years.

When three separate streams of copying, Hebrew, Greek, and Samaritan, kept apart for centuries, all tell the same stories in the same order with the same laws, you have good reason to believe the text was not invented or reshaped along the way.

## What This Means for You

When you open your Bible to Isaiah, you are reading a book that was copied by hand for more than two thousand years, and we can check that copying against a scroll from before the time of Christ. Jesus said, "The heaven and the earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Matthew 24:35). The Dead Sea Scrolls are one of the ways God has kept that promise in plain view.

## Study Questions

1. Who were the Masoretes, and what did they do to protect the text?
2. Why was the discovery of the Great Isaiah Scroll so important?
3. Read Isaiah 53:5. Why does it matter that this chapter was found in a scroll copied before Jesus was born?
4. The Dead Sea Scrolls show some differences between copies. Why is it better to admit that than to hide it?
5. What do the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls tell us about the age of the priestly blessing?

# Chapter 4: The New Testament Text: More Copies Than Any Other Ancient Book

> *Because "All flesh **is** like grass, and all **the** glory of man like **the** flower of grass. The grass withered, and its flower fell off, but the declaration of **the** Lord abides forever." And this is the declaration which was preached as the gospel to you.*
>
> 1 Peter 1:24-25 (SLB)

You will sometimes hear people say, "The Bible has been translated and changed so many times that nobody knows what it originally said." It sounds reasonable, and a lot of people believe it. But it simply isn't true, and the New Testament is the best example.

## Translated From What?

First, a simple point. Your English New Testament is not a translation of a translation of a translation. Modern translators work directly from the Greek, using the oldest and best copies available. The SLB I quote in this book was made the same way, from the ancient sources.

So the real question is not "How many times has it been translated?" The real question is "How well do the Greek copies preserve what the apostles wrote?"

## How Many Copies?

The official list of Greek New Testament manuscripts is kept by the Institute for New Testament Textual Research at the University of Munster in Germany. Its catalog is called the *Kurzgefasste Liste*, German for "short list," though at this point it is anything but short. In 2023, the Institute reported that the list held about 5,700 entries. After removing manuscripts that have been destroyed or whose location is unknown, about 5,541 survive.

Some of these are complete New Testaments. Many are single books. Some are tiny scraps the size of a credit card. Some are lectionaries, which are books of Scripture readings arranged for church services. And the count keeps going up, because new manuscripts keep turning up in libraries and monasteries. On top of the Greek, there are thousands of early copies in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and other languages, and so many quotations in the writings of early church leaders that scholars say you could rebuild most of the New Testament from those quotations alone.

No other book from the ancient world comes close. Most works of ancient Greek and Roman history survive in a handful of copies, many of them made a thousand years or more after the author lived. Experts count manuscripts differently, so I won't give you a precise scoreboard, but the gap is not close. The New Testament is the best preserved book of the ancient world by a very wide margin.

## How Early?

Even more important than the number is the date. How soon after the apostles do the copies begin?

- **Papyrus 52** (the Rylands fragment) is a scrap of papyrus about the size of your palm, now in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England. It holds parts of John 18:31-33 on one side and John 18:37-38 on the other, from Jesus' trial before Pilate. It is usually dated to the first half or the middle of the second century, roughly A.D. 125 to 175, though some scholars argue it could be somewhat later. Either way, it shows John's Gospel was being copied in Egypt, far from where it was written, not long after John's death.
- **Papyrus 66** and **Papyrus 75**, part of the Bodmer Papyri in Geneva and the Vatican Library, contain large parts of John and Luke. They are usually dated to around A.D. 200, give or take.
- **The Chester Beatty Papyri** in Dublin include Papyrus 46, which holds most of Paul's letters, usually dated to around A.D. 200.
- **Codex Vaticanus** in the Vatican Library and **Codex Sinaiticus**, found in the 1840s and 1850s by Constantin von Tischendorf at St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, are complete or nearly complete Bibles from the 300s A.D. Most of Sinaiticus is in the British Library in London, and you can view every page of it online.

That means the gap between the writing of the New Testament and our earliest copies is measured in decades, not in many centuries.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.* The New Testament is the best attested book of the ancient world, both in number of copies and in how early they are.

## What About All Those Differences?

You may have heard a skeptic say there are hundreds of thousands of differences, called *variants*, among the New Testament manuscripts. That number is real, and I want to explain it honestly.

When you have thousands of hand-copied manuscripts, you will have a lot of differences, because every copyist made small mistakes. The more copies you have, the more variants you count. A book with only five copies will have very few variants, not because it was copied better, but because there is so little to compare.

The great majority of variants are spelling differences, word order (which often makes no difference in Greek), or obvious slips. A much smaller number make a real difference in meaning, and scholars can usually tell which reading is original by comparing the oldest and widest spread copies. Your Bible's footnotes show you the main ones.

There are a few longer passages you should know about, because your Bible may mark them.

- **Mark 16:9-20.** The two oldest complete manuscripts, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, end Mark at 16:8. Most later manuscripts include verses 9 to 20.
- **John 7:53 to 8:11**, the woman caught in adultery, is missing from the earliest manuscripts.
- **1 John 5:7**, the verse about the Father, the Word, and the Spirit as three who testify in heaven, is missing from almost all early Greek manuscripts. The SLB includes it, following the printed Greek text of the Reformation era.

Christians have discussed these passages openly for centuries. Here is the key point. No doctrine of the Christian faith depends on any of them. The deity of Christ, His death for sin, His resurrection, salvation by grace through faith, all of it stands on many passages that no one questions.

## Still Turning Up

New discoveries keep coming.

In 2023, Grigory Kessel of the Austrian Academy of Sciences published a hidden layer of text in a manuscript at the Vatican Library. The parchment had been scraped and reused, which is called a *palimpsest* (PAL-imp-sest). Using ultraviolet photography, Kessel read part of a very old Syriac translation of the Gospel of Matthew underneath. The Academy described the translation as about 1,750 years old.

Also in 2023, scholars at Oxford published a papyrus from the Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchus, numbered P.Oxy. 5575. Dated to the late second or early third century, it collects sayings of Jesus that match Matthew 6 and Luke 12, along with one saying also found in the later Gospel of Thomas.

In 2026, the University of Glasgow announced that multispectral imaging, which photographs a page in many different colors of light, had recovered 42 lost pages of Codex H, a sixth-century copy of Paul's letters whose pages had been scattered and reused.

Each find adds another witness. None of them has shown that the New Testament was changed into something different from what the apostles wrote.

## What This Means for You

The New Testament you hold is not a rumor passed down a long line of people. It is a text with thousands of witnesses, some of them within a few generations of the apostles. Peter quoted Isaiah when he wrote, "but the declaration of ***the*** Lord abides forever" (1 Peter 1:25). The manuscripts are not the reason God's Word lasts, but they are a reason we can see that it has.

## Study Questions

1. Why is "the Bible has been translated so many times" a misunderstanding of how Bibles are made?
2. What is Papyrus 52, and why is its date important?
3. Why does having more manuscripts mean counting more variants?
4. Why do some Bibles put brackets around Mark 16:9-20 or John 7:53 to 8:11? Does any doctrine depend on them?
5. How should a Christian answer a friend who says the Bible was changed over time?

# Part Three: The Old Testament in the Ground

# Chapter 5: Noah, the Flood, and the Search for the Ark

> *And just as the days of Noah **were**, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.*
>
> Matthew 24:37 (SLB)

Ask almost anyone about the Bible and archaeology, and sooner or later the question comes up: “Didn’t they find Noah’s ark?” It is one of the most repeated claims in the whole subject, and one of the most misunderstood. In this chapter I want to look at what the evidence really says about the flood, about the boat God told Noah to build, and about the search for its remains, including an investigation going on right now in eastern Turkey.

Writing the Fact Check Series taught me to ask the same questions about every big claim: who found it, was it independently checked, and what evidence actually exists. Most viral Noah's ark headlines fall apart once you ask those questions. Faith in God's Word does not need sensational headlines to prop it up.

## What the Bible Says

Genesis 6 to 9 tells how God saw that the earth was filled with violence, and how He told Noah to build an ark to save his family and the animals. The flood came, the waters rose over the mountains, and after many months the ark came to rest. Then God made a covenant with Noah and set His rainbow in the clouds.

> *And the waters prevailed exceedingly, exceedingly on the earth, and all the high mountains which **were** under all the heavens were covered.* (Genesis 7:19)

I believe the flood covered the whole earth, the same as I wrote in my Genesis study. The text piles up every kind of universal language: all the high mountains, under all the heavens, all flesh. A local flood would not need an ark that size. Noah could have moved his family and the animals somewhere else, and the birds could have flown away. And God’s promise that there would never again be a flood to destroy the earth (Genesis 9:11) would not hold up, since there have been terrible local floods ever since.

Some Christians hold that the flood covered the world as Noah knew it, the region where people lived. They point out that “all the earth” sometimes means a region, as in Genesis 41:57, when “all the earth” came to Egypt to buy grain. I respect them, and they are my brothers and sisters. But I think Genesis 6 to 9 reads plainly as a worldwide event.

Jesus treated the flood as history. He compared His own coming to it: “they did not know until the flood came and took all away” (Matthew 24:39). Peter wrote that eight souls were saved through water (1 Peter 3:20), and that the world at that time, “having been flooded with water, perished” (2 Peter 3:6). Hebrews 11:7 puts Noah in the list of real people who lived by faith. If Jesus and the apostles took Noah as a real man, I don’t think I should take him as a fable.

## Flood Stories Around the World

Here is something archaeology and the study of ancient cultures can show. Stories of a great flood are found all over the world, in the Middle East, India, China, the Pacific islands, and the Americas. They differ a lot, but many share the same core: a flood sent as judgment, a small group saved, often in a boat, and a new start for mankind.

The closest stories to Genesis come from ancient Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

- **The Epic of Gilgamesh.** Clay tablets of this poem were found at Nineveh in the 1850s, in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. In 1872, George Smith of the British Museum read the eleventh tablet and found a flood story in it. The hero, Utnapishtim, is warned by a god to build a boat, takes his family and animals aboard, and after the flood sends out a dove, a swallow, and a raven to look for dry land. The boat lands on a mountain, and he offers a sacrifice.
- **The Atrahasis Epic.** An older Babylonian poem, known from copies from about the 1600s B.C., tells a similar story with a hero named Atrahasis.
- **The Sumerian flood story.** A Sumerian tablet tells of a king named Ziusudra who survived the flood in a large boat.
- **The Sumerian King List.** This list of ancient kings divides history into the kings who reigned "before the flood" and those after it. The kings before the flood are given enormous reigns, which reminds many readers of the long lives in Genesis 5.

The parallels with Genesis are real, and so are the differences. In Gilgamesh and Atrahasis, the gods are quarrelsome and short-sighted. In Atrahasis, they send the flood partly because people are making too much noise for them to sleep. Afterward, the gods are so hungry without sacrifices that they gather around Utnapishtim's offering "like flies." Genesis tells of one holy God who judges real evil, saves a righteous man by grace, and makes a promise He keeps.

So what do the parallels mean? Skeptics say Genesis borrowed from Babylon. Many Christians, including me, see it the other way around. If the flood really happened, you would expect the families who came off the ark to carry the memory with them, and you would expect the story to get bent and decorated as it passed through many cultures. Genesis, with its sober details and its one true God, reads like the original. Archaeology alone can't prove which way the borrowing went. What it does show is that the ancient world remembered a great flood.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that the ancient Near East preserved flood stories with close parallels to Genesis. Whether they point back to the same event is a matter of interpretation.

## A Boat Built to Float

> *And this is how you shall make it: the length of the ark approximately 450 feet (three hundred cubits), its breadth approximately 75 feet (fifty cubits), and its height approximately 45 feet (thirty cubits).* (Genesis 6:15)

The ark in Genesis is a long box, six times longer than it is wide, and ten times longer than it is high. Those are the proportions of a sensible ship. Modern cargo ships have ratios in the same general range.

Compare that with the Babylonian versions. In Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim's boat is described as a cube, equal in width and length, with seven decks. A cube would roll and tumble in rough water. In 2014, Irving Finkel of the British Museum published a small Babylonian tablet, now called the Ark Tablet, from about 1750 B.C. It gives building instructions for the Atrahasis boat, and the boat is round, a giant version of the reed and rope coracles used on the rivers of Iraq.

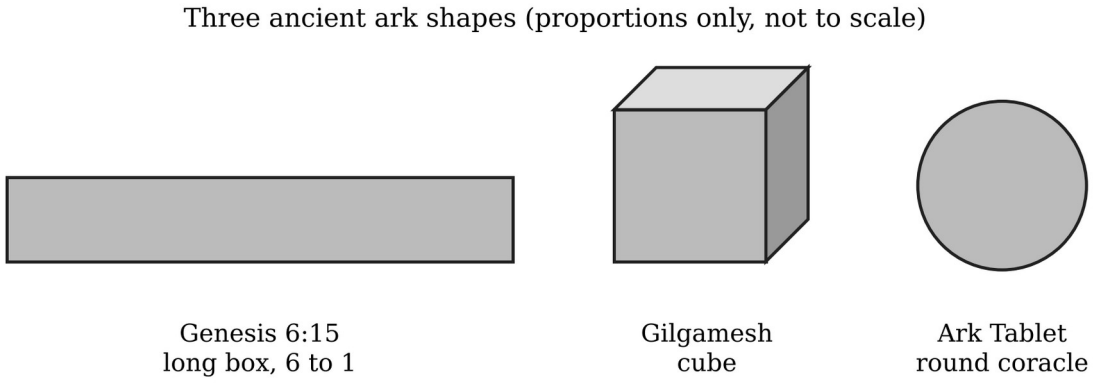



*Figure 2. The Genesis ark compared with the boats in two Babylonian flood stories*

A team of Korean engineers led by S. W. Hong tested scale models of the Genesis ark in the large towing tank of the Korea Research Institute of Ships and Ocean Engineering and compared its shape with other hull shapes. Their paper, published in the creationist *Journal of Creation* in 1994 and paid for by the Korea Association of Creation Research, concluded that the Genesis proportions gave a good balance of stability, strength, and comfort for riding out heavy seas. The study was done by Christian researchers, so I'll let you weigh that. But the basic point is easy to see without any study: the Bible's boat looks like it was designed by Someone who knew how ships work, and the Babylonian boats don't.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that the Genesis proportions are seaworthy and far more realistic than the Babylonian versions.

## Where Did the Ark Land?

Genesis 8:4 says the ark rested "on the mountains of Ararat." Notice that it says mountains, plural. In the Bible, Ararat is the name of a land, the kingdom the Assyrians called Urartu, around Lake Van in what is now eastern Turkey, Armenia, and northwest Iran. Second Kings 19:37 says the sons of Sennacherib "escaped ***to*** the land of Ararat." The tall volcano that is called Mount Ararat today, almost 17,000 feet high, is in that region, but the Bible doesn't name a single peak.

That matters, because the ark could have come to rest anywhere in that mountain country. Ancient writers had their own ideas. Josephus, writing in the first century, said that a Babylonian historian named Berossus reported that remains of the ark could still be seen in the mountains of Armenia, and that people took pieces of its pitch as charms (Antiquities 1.93). That tells us people were looking for it even then. It doesn't tell us they found it.

## Claims That Did Not Hold Up

For more than a century, explorers have climbed Mount Ararat looking for the ark. Several came back with exciting claims.

- **The Navarra wood.** In 1955, the French explorer Fernand Navarra brought back hand-cut wood from a glacier crevice high on Mount Ararat. Some early tests suggested great age, but radiocarbon tests by several labs mostly dated the wood to about A.D. 700 to 800. That is far too young for Noah, and it may come from a later chapel or shrine built on the mountain.
- **The 2010 Hong Kong claim.** A group called Noah's Ark Ministries International announced that it had found wooden chambers high on Ararat. Other explorers, including some who had worked with the group, said the find was staged with wood carried up the mountain. No independent study ever backed it up.
- **Photos and stories.** Many "eyewitness" stories and blurry photos have circulated over the years. None has led to anything that could be tested.

## The Durupinar Site: An Investigation Still Going On

The best-known candidate today is not on Mount Ararat at all. It is a boat-shaped formation in the hills south of the mountain, called the Durupinar site after Ilhan Durupinar, the Turkish army captain who noticed its shape in an aerial photo while on a mapping mission in October 1959. It is about 500 feet long, close to the 300 cubits of Genesis if you use a longer cubit. In September 1960, an American and Turkish expedition, including Captain Durupinar and photo-mapping expert Arthur Brandenberger, surveyed the site and announced that it was a freak of nature, not man-made. In the 1980s, Ron Wyatt and David Fasold promoted it as the ark, and it became a tourist stop with a visitor center.

Then the case took a turn. In 1996, David Fasold himself, who had once championed the site, and geologist Lorence Collins published a paper in the *Journal of Geoscience Education* concluding that Durupinar is a natural rock formation, a kind of fold geologists call a syncline, and that the "iron fittings" and "petrified wood" found there could be explained by ordinary rocks and minerals. That paper has been the main scientific objection ever since.

Now a new investigation is under way, and it is the most serious one so far.

- **2021 to 2025.** A team from the United States called Noah's Ark Scans, founded by Andrew Jones, ran ground-penetrating radar and other surveys and reported straight lines, right angles, and open spaces under the surface. In 2023, Turkish researchers reported that about 30 rock and soil samples tested at Istanbul Technical University were 3,500 to 5,000 years old. But one of the scientists involved, Professor Faruk Kaya of Agri Ibrahim Cecen University, said plainly that the dating did not show a ship was there.
- **Summer and fall 2026.** With approval from the Turkish government in June 2026, a team led by Professor Cenker Atila of Sivas Cumhuriyet University in Turkey, working with Noah's Ark Scans, began core drilling in September. The team reported that it found no solid bedrock inside the formation, that a drill bit broke on something hard about 13 to 16 feet down, and that soil from inside the shape held more carbon and organic material than soil outside it.
- **October 2026.** At a symposium in Agri, Turkey, in mid-October, Professor Atila announced that the team had recovered small pieces of what it describes as burnt wood. A report on November 10, 2026 said the pieces came from about 30 feet down. The samples have been sent to laboratories for radiocarbon dating and to identify the kind of tree.

Here is where things stand as I write this in November 2026. No lab results have been published. No independent geologist or archaeologist has reviewed the new data in print. The team itself calls its results suggestive, not proof, and the full report is not expected until the spring of 2027 at the earliest. Professor Atila said he is eagerly waiting for the results, and so am I.

Keep two things in mind as the news comes out. First, a radiocarbon date tells you when a tree died, not who used the wood or what for. Even an old date would not prove the wood came from a boat. Second, shape alone can't prove a mound is man-made. Nature makes surprising shapes, and that is exactly what the 1996 paper argued. The questions that matter are where exactly each sample came from, whether it is really wood, how old it is, and whether outside labs and scientists confirm the findings.

I would be thrilled if the ark were found. But as of today, it hasn't been, and the honest thing is to watch, wait for the evidence, and not get ahead of it. If you hear someone say "they found Noah's ark," the right answer is: "A team is testing a site in Turkey, the results aren't in, and I'm waiting to see."

**Evidence check:** *Not supported* for any claim that the ark has been found. The Durupinar investigation is ongoing as of November 2026, with lab results pending.

## Why It Matters

Our faith in the flood doesn't rest on finding a boat. It rests on the word of God and on Jesus, who spoke of Noah as a real man. And the flood isn't only about the past. Jesus said the days before His coming will be like the days of Noah, with people eating, drinking, and marrying, going on with life as though nothing was coming, "until the flood came and took all away" (Matthew 24:39).

Noah was saved because he believed God and went into the ark God provided. There is one door into safety today too, and His name is Jesus.

## Study Questions

1. What reasons does this chapter give for reading the flood as worldwide? What do Christians who hold a regional flood point to?
2. How do the Babylonian flood stories differ from Genesis in what they say about God?
3. Why does the shape of the ark in Genesis 6:15 matter? How does it compare with the boats in the Babylonian stories?
4. Why does it matter that Genesis 8:4 says "the mountains of Ararat" and not one mountain?
5. If you hear that Noah's ark has been found, what questions should you ask before you believe it?

# Chapter 6: The World of the Patriarchs

> *And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Abram his son; and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came as far as Haran, and they dwelt there.*
>
> Genesis 11:31 (SLB)

The stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are the oldest in the Bible's family history. They are also the hardest to check, and I want to say that up front.

Abraham was a man who lived in tents and moved with his flocks. Nomads don't build palaces or carve monuments. No one has found an inscription that names Abraham, and I don't expect anyone ever will. The same goes for Isaac and Jacob. If you hear a preacher say, "Archaeologists have found Abraham's house," be skeptical.

So what can archaeology do here? It can check whether the world the stories describe is the real world of that time. And in that, it has a good deal to say.

## Ur of the Chaldeans

Genesis says Abraham's family came from "Ur of the Chaldeans." For a long time, Ur was just a name. Then, from 1922 to 1934, British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley led a joint expedition of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum at a mound in southern Iraq called Tell el-Muqayyar. He found Ur: a great city with a huge stepped temple tower called a *ziggurat*, royal tombs full of gold, and thousands of clay tablets. The ziggurat of Ur is still standing today, partly restored.

Scholars still debate whether the Ur in southern Iraq is the same as Abraham's Ur, and the phrase "of the Chaldeans" is probably the way a later writer helped readers place it, since the Chaldeans came along after Abraham's time. But the city was real, it was ancient, and it was a center for worship of the moon god. Haran, where Abraham's family settled next (Genesis 11:31), was also a center of moon worship, and it is a real city in southern Turkey that still carries the same name today.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for the city. *Debated* for whether this is the exact Ur of Genesis.

## The Hittites Come Back From the Dead

The Bible mentions a people called the Hittites more than forty times. Abraham bought a burial cave from "Ephron the Hittite" (Genesis 23:10). Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, was a Hittite. Solomon traded horses and chariots with Hittite kings.

In the 1800s, no other ancient source anyone knew of described a great Hittite people, and some writers suggested the Bible had made a mistake or invented them. Then the evidence started piling up. In 1906, German archaeologist Hugo Winckler began digging at Bogazkoy in central Turkey and found the Hittite capital, Hattusa, with an archive of thousands of clay tablets. The Hittites turned out to be one of the

great powers of the ancient world, rivals of Egypt itself. In 1915 the Czech scholar Bedrich Hrozny worked out how to read their language.

In September 2026, Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced that excavators at Hattusa had found a new fragment of the peace treaty the Hittites made with Egypt after the battle of Kadesh, around 1259 B.C., the oldest known peace treaty in history.

I should add one honest note. Scholars still discuss how the Hittites of Genesis, living around Hebron, relate to the great empire in Turkey. The Bible may use the name for more than one related group. But nobody today says the Hittites were made up.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.* The Hittites were a real and powerful people.

## Semites in Egypt

The story of Joseph has people from Canaan going down to Egypt, first as slaves and then as a family looking for food in a famine. Does that fit what we know?

It does. A tomb painting at Beni Hasan in Egypt, from the tomb of an official named Khnumhotep II around 1890 B.C., shows a group of Asiatic people (people from Canaan or Syria) arriving in Egypt in colorful clothing, with their donkeys, to trade. A papyrus in the Brooklyn Museum, from around 1740 B.C., lists the servants in an Egyptian household, and more than forty of them have Semitic names, the family of languages that includes Hebrew.

At Tell el-Daba in the eastern Nile Delta, Austrian archaeologist Manfred Bietak excavated a city called Avaris, where many people from Canaan settled in the centuries before about 1550 B.C. Later Egyptian kings built a new capital called Pi-Ramesses on top of the same area. The Bible calls this region "the land of Rameses" (Genesis 47:11) and says the Israelites built a storage city called Rameses (Exodus 1:11).

None of this names Joseph. But it shows that Semites really did go down to Egypt, settle in the eastern Delta, and sometimes serve in Egyptian households, just as Genesis describes.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for the background. No direct evidence of Joseph himself.

## The Price of a Slave

Here is one detail I find striking. Joseph's brothers sold him for twenty shekels of silver (Genesis 37:28). Kenneth Kitchen, a British Egyptologist who taught for decades at the University of Liverpool, tracked the price of slaves in ancient records and showed that the average price rose over time. In the early second millennium B.C., about the time many scholars place Joseph, the going rate was about twenty shekels. Later it climbed to thirty, then fifty and more. The Bible's price fits Joseph's era, not a later one. Kitchen laid out this and much more in his book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (2003).

Not every scholar accepts every point Kitchen makes, and he wrote as someone who trusted the Bible. But his price list is drawn from real tablets and papyri that anyone can check.

## Camels

You should know about one debate that made headlines. Genesis mentions camels in the stories of Abraham and Joseph (Genesis 12:16; 24:10; 37:25). In a study published at the end of 2013, two archaeologists from Tel Aviv University, Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Yosef, showed that domesticated camels first appear in large numbers in the copper mines of the Aravah Valley around the 900s B.C. News outlets ran headlines saying the Bible had been caught in a mistake.

The study itself was more careful than the headlines. Other evidence, from Egypt, Arabia, and Mesopotamia, suggests camels were known and used in small numbers much earlier. A wealthy man like Abraham, receiving gifts from Pharaoh, could well have owned a few. The study shows when camels became common in that one valley. It doesn't show that no one in the region ever owned one before.

**Evidence check:** *Debated.* The headlines overstated the case against Genesis, but this is a live discussion.

## Study Questions

1. Why is it unreasonable to expect archaeologists to find Abraham's name on a monument?
2. What happened to the claim that the Hittites never existed?
3. How does the Beni Hasan tomb painting fit the story of Joseph's family?
4. Why is the price of twenty shekels for Joseph an interesting detail?
5. What can we learn from the camel debate about reading news headlines on archaeology?

# Chapter 7: Egypt, the Exodus, and the Conquest

> *And they set over it officers of forced labor so as to afflict it with their burdens; and it built storage cities for Pharaoh, Pithom and Rameses.*
>
> Exodus 1:11 (SLB)

If you want to start an argument among Bible archaeologists, ask them when the Exodus happened. This is the most debated part of the Bible's history, and I am going to show you both the evidence that supports it and the questions that are still open.

## Israel on an Egyptian Stone

In 1896, Sir Flinders Petrie was digging at Thebes in Egypt when he found a tall black granite slab, about ten feet high. It was a victory monument of Pharaoh Merneptah, son of Ramesses II, carved around 1208 B.C. Most of it brags about Merneptah's defeat of the Libyans. But near the end, it lists his victories in Canaan, and one line says:

"Israel is laid waste; his seed is not."

That is the oldest mention of the name Israel outside the Bible. And the way it is written matters. Egyptian writing used little signs called *determinatives* to tell the reader what kind of word came next. The names Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam in the same passage have the sign for a city or land. Israel has the sign for a people. In other words, by 1208 B.C., Israel was a people living in Canaan, important enough for Pharaoh to brag about beating them.

The Merneptah Stele is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.* Israel was a people in Canaan by about 1208 B.C.

## What About the Exodus Itself?

Here is the honest truth. There is no Egyptian record that says, "Hebrew slaves left Egypt after ten plagues." Should that surprise us? Not really. Pharaohs carved their victories in stone, not their defeats. No king of Egypt was going to build a monument to the day his army drowned and his slaves walked out.

There is also very little left of the eastern Nile Delta, where the Israelites lived. It is a wet, muddy floodplain where mud brick and papyrus rot away. Very few papyri from that region have survived from any period.

So the question becomes: does the background of the story fit Egypt? And there, several details do.

- Many of the names in the Exodus story are Egyptian, including Moses, Phinehas, Hophni, and Merari.
- Ancient Egypt really did use foreign workers to make mud bricks for building projects. A painting in the tomb of Rekhmire, a high official at Thebes around 1450 B.C., shows foreign workers making bricks under taskmasters with rods.

- The city of Pi-Ramesses in the eastern Delta was real and was built by Ramesses II, which matches the city of Rameses in Exodus 1:11.

## Early or Late?

Christians who trust the Bible fall into two main camps on the date of the Exodus.

The **early date** places it around 1446 B.C. It comes from 1 Kings 6:1, which says Solomon began building the temple in the 480th year after Israel left Egypt. Solomon's fourth year was around 966 B.C., and 966 plus 480 is 1446.

> *And it came about in the four hundred and eightieth year of the going out of the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt, in the fourth year, in the month of Ziv, that **is** the second month, of the reigning of Solomon over Israel, and he built the house for the LORD.* (1 Kings 6:1)

The **late date** places it around 1270 to 1250 B.C., in the reign of Ramesses II. Supporters point to the city of Rameses and argue that the 480 years may be a round number for twelve generations of forty years each.

Both views are held by serious scholars who believe the Bible. I lean toward the early date because it takes the number in 1 Kings 6:1 at face value, but I hold that loosely. The point for this book is that the Exodus is debated as to *when*, and the evidence leaves room for both.

**Evidence check:** *Debated.* The background fits Egypt well, but there is no direct Egyptian record of the Exodus, and its date is argued.

## Jericho

Jericho may be the most famous dig in Bible archaeology, and the story of its walls shows how hard this work can be.

In the 1930s, British archaeologist John Garstang dug at Jericho and reported that a city wall had collapsed and the city had been burned around 1400 B.C. That fit the early date of the Exodus perfectly.

In the 1950s, British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon dug again with better methods. She agreed the city had been destroyed violently, with walls collapsed and a thick burn layer, but she dated the destruction to around 1550 B.C., more than a century too early for Joshua. She concluded there was little or no city there in Joshua's day.

In 1990, American archaeologist Bryant Wood re-examined Garstang's and Kenyon's pottery, along with a radiocarbon date, and argued for a destruction around 1400 B.C. after all. He also pointed out details that match the Bible remarkably well: the city was burned (Joshua 6:24); large jars full of grain were found in the houses, which means the city fell quickly after the spring harvest, not after a long siege (Joshua 2:6; 3:15; 5:10); and a mudbrick wall had tumbled down the slope, creating a ramp into the city (Joshua 6:20).

> *And the people shouted, and they blew the trumpets. And it was, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted **with** a great shout, and the wall fell in its place;*

> *and the people went up into the city, each man straight before him, and they captured the city.* (Joshua 6:20)

Other experts strongly disagree with Wood's dating. A radiocarbon study published in 1995 by Hendrik Bruins and Johannes van der Plicht supported a date in the 1500s. The Italian-Palestinian expedition led by Lorenzo Nigro of Sapienza University, which has dug at Jericho since 1997, has reported finds from many periods and continues to publish.

Here's where I land. The burned city, the stored grain, and the fallen wall are real, and they match Joshua's description in striking ways. The date is still argued, and anyone who tells you it is settled either way is overselling.

**Evidence check:** *Debated.*

## Hazor

Joshua 11 says Joshua burned Hazor, "the head of all these kingdoms." Hazor, in northern Israel, was the largest city in Canaan, about 200 acres. Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin dug there in the 1950s, and Amnon Ben-Tor of the Hebrew University led new excavations from 1990 onward. They found that the great Canaanite city was destroyed in a fierce fire, hot enough to crack basalt and melt mud brick. Statues of Canaanite gods and kings had been deliberately smashed and beheaded. Ben-Tor argued that the Israelites were the most likely ones to have done it, since Egyptians would not have smashed Egyptian-style statues and Canaanites would not have defaced their own gods.

Ben-Tor dated the destruction to the 1200s B.C., which fits the late date of the conquest better. Other scholars propose different dates. But the burn layer is real, and it is massive.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for a violent destruction of Canaanite Hazor. *Debated* for who did it and when.

## Shiloh

After the conquest, the tabernacle was set up at Shiloh (Joshua 18:1), and it stayed there through the time of the judges until the days of Eli and young Samuel. The Associates for Biblical Research, led by Scott Stripling, has excavated at Shiloh since 2017. They have uncovered large walls and storage rooms, many animal bones from the right side of the animal (the priest's portion in Leviticus 7:32-33), and in 2026 they reported the eighth season, with more walls of a monumental building and jars still holding burned olives and wheat.

These are claims by a team that openly trusts the Bible, and other scholars will test them. But the work is published and the finds are real.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that Shiloh was an important site. *Debated* for some interpretations.

## Mount Ebal

Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8 say Israel built an altar on Mount Ebal and read the blessings and curses there. In the 1980s, Israeli archaeologist Adam Zertal of the University of Haifa excavated a large stone

structure on the mountain, with bones of kosher animals, and argued that it was an early Israelite altar from about 1200 B.C. Many scholars agree it was a place of worship. Others think it was a watchtower or farmhouse.

In 2023, Stripling and colleagues published a study of a tiny folded piece of lead found in Zertal's discarded dirt, arguing that it carried an early Hebrew curse naming God. That claim has been strongly challenged. Several leading experts in ancient writing, including Christopher Rollston and Aren Maeir, argued that there is no clear writing on it at all, and Amihai Mazar suggested it was a fishing weight. In 2024, another scholar argued it was a lead object from Roman times. As of this writing, the debate continues.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that the Mount Ebal structure was a place of worship. *Not supported, for now*, for the lead "curse tablet." I would not use it in an argument with a skeptic.

## What About Sodom?

You may have seen news stories in 2021 saying that scientists had found evidence that a city near the Dead Sea, Tall el-Hammam, was destroyed by an exploding space rock, and that this could be the source of the Sodom story. The paper was published in *Scientific Reports*. Other scientists challenged its data and its images, and in April 2025 the journal retracted it.

I mention this because many Christian websites shared it. Tall el-Hammam is a real and important site, and its destruction is real. But the airburst paper is no longer accepted as evidence, and we shouldn't use it.

**Evidence check:** *Not supported* (paper retracted in 2025).

## Study Questions

1. What does the Merneptah Stele tell us about Israel in 1208 B.C.?
2. Why might Egypt have left no record of the Exodus?
3. What is the difference between the early date and the late date for the Exodus? Why do both have defenders among Bible-believing scholars?
4. What details at Jericho match Joshua 6? Why is the date still debated?
5. Why should Christians stop sharing the Tall el-Hammam airburst story?

# Chapter 8: David and Solomon

> *And David captured the stronghold of Zion; it **is** the city of David.*
>
> 2 Samuel 5:7 (SLB)

For much of the late 1900s, a group of scholars argued that King David was about as historical as King Arthur. Their reasoning went like this: there was no inscription anywhere that named him, Jerusalem in his day seemed to be a small village, and so the stories of his kingdom must have been invented centuries later to give Israel a glorious past.

For years critics claimed King David was a legend because no inscription outside the Bible named him. Then the Tel Dan inscription turned up with the words "House of David." What the Bible records as history keeps standing up, even when people doubt it.

Then the evidence started talking back.

## The House of David

In the summer of 1993, at Tel Dan in far northern Israel, surveyor Gila Cook of Avraham Biran's excavation team noticed a piece of black basalt stuck in an ancient wall. It had writing on it. Two more pieces turned up in 1994.

The stone was a victory monument carved in Aramaic, around 840 B.C., most likely by Hazael, the king of Damascus in Syria. The king brags that he killed the king of Israel and the king of the "House of David." The words are written *bytdwd*, Hebrew-style letters without vowels for "House of David."

"House of David" was how the region's kings referred to the kingdom of Judah, the dynasty founded by David. It means that within about 150 years of David's death, a foreign enemy knew Judah's royal family by his name. You don't name a dynasty after someone who never existed.

The Tel Dan Stele is on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.* Almost all scholars accept that the Tel Dan Stele names the dynasty of David.

## The Moabite Stone

The Mesha Stele, also called the Moabite Stone, was found in 1868 at Dhiban in Jordan. Mesha, the king of Moab, set it up around 840 B.C. to celebrate breaking free of Israel. The Bible tells the same story from Israel's side.

> *And Mesha the king of Moab was a sheep breeder, and he would render to the king of Israel a hundred thousand lambs and a hundred thousand rams, **with their** wool. And it was, when Ahab died, and the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.* (2 Kings 3:4-5)

The stone names Mesha. It names Omri, king of Israel, and says Omri oppressed Moab for many days, and his son after him. It names Israel's God, Yahweh. It names the tribe of Gad and several towns found in the Bible.

After the stone was found, local people broke it into pieces before it could be moved, but a French scholar named Charles Clermont-Ganneau had already made a paper impression of the text. The pieces were gathered and restored, and the stone is now in the Louvre in Paris.

In 1994, French scholar Andre Lemaire suggested that a damaged line near the bottom also reads "House of David." In 2022 and 2023, Lemaire and Jean-Philippe Delorme published new high-resolution images supporting that reading. Some scholars still disagree, so I'll put that line in the "debated" column. But the stone's mention of Omri, Israel, and Yahweh is not in doubt.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for Mesha, Omri, Israel, and Yahweh. *Debated* for a second "House of David."

## Khirbet Qeiyafa

About twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem, on a hill overlooking the Valley of Elah, where David fought Goliath (1 Samuel 17:2), sits a site called Khirbet Qeiyafa. From 2007 to 2013, Yosef Garfinkel of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Saar Ganor of the Israel Antiquities Authority excavated it.

They found a fortified town with two gates, a massive wall of huge stones, and buildings laid out in a planned pattern. Radiocarbon dates from olive pits put it around 1020 to 980 B.C., the time of Saul and David. They found no pig bones, which fits an Israelite or Judean population that kept the food laws. They also found a pottery fragment with one of the earliest known Hebrew inscriptions.

Garfinkel argued that a fortified, planned town like this means there was a central government in Judah at the time of David. In 2023, he published a study in the *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* arguing that several other early Judean towns, including Beth Shemesh, Lachish, and Tell en-Nasbeh, share the same city plan.

Not everyone agrees that Qeiyafa was Judean. Some scholars think it was Canaanite or tied to the northern tribes. But the date is firm, and it shows a well-organized town in exactly the place and time the Bible puts David.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for a fortified town in David's time. *Debated* for who built it.

## Jerusalem in David's Day

The big question about David has always been Jerusalem. Was it a capital or a village?

In 2005, Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar uncovered massive stone walls at the top of the City of David, the oldest part of Jerusalem, and argued they were part of David's palace. Below it runs the Stepped Stone Structure, a huge retaining wall of stone on the slope. Some scholars date parts of these to the 900s B.C. Others date them later.

In 2024, a team led by Johanna Regev and Elisabetta Boaretto of the Weizmann Institute of Science, with Joe Uziel of the Israel Antiquities Authority and Yuval Gadot of Tel Aviv University, published more than one hundred radiocarbon dates from the City of David in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Their results showed that Jerusalem was lived in through the 1100s and 1000s B.C., the very centuries some had called empty, and that the city grew significantly in the 800s B.C.

Also in 2024, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced that a tiny gold-and-silver pendant from Eilat Mazar's Ophel excavations, dated to the 900s B.C., is the earliest gold jewelry ever found in Jerusalem. It was made in the Phoenician style, which fits the Bible's account of Solomon's close ties with Hiram, king of Tyre (1 Kings 5).

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that Jerusalem was inhabited and growing in the time of David and Solomon. *Debated* for how large and grand it was.

## Solomon's Gates

The Bible says Solomon built up three key cities.

> *And this **is** the account of the forced labor which King Solomon raised to build the house of the LORD and his own house and the Millo and the wall of Jerusalem, and Hazor and Megiddo and Gezer.* (1 Kings 9:15)

In the 1950s and 1960s, Yigael Yadin noticed that Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer each had a city gate with the same unusual design: six rooms, three on each side of the passage, with nearly identical measurements. He argued that the same royal architects built all three, under Solomon.

That idea came under fire in the 1990s, when Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University argued that these gates were built a century later, under the dynasty of Omri. In 2023, a team publishing in *PLOS One* reported 35 radiocarbon dates from Gezer, from excavations led by the Tandy Institute for Archaeology. The layer with the six-chambered gate dated to the early 900s B.C., the time of Solomon.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for Gezer. Still *debated* for the other gates.

## Edom and the Copper Mines

The Bible says David put garrisons in Edom (2 Samuel 8:14). Critics argued that Edom wasn't a kingdom at all until the 700s B.C. Since 2002, Erez Ben-Yosef of Tel Aviv University has led excavations at the copper mines of Timna and Faynan in the Aravah Valley, south of the Dead Sea. His team found a large, organized copper industry, run by local nomadic people, at its peak in the 900s B.C.

Ben-Yosef has argued that a kingdom run by people who lived in tents can leave very little behind, which means archaeologists may have underestimated early kingdoms, including Israel's, because they were looking for stone buildings. He doesn't write as a defender of the Bible, which makes his point even more interesting.

## Shishak's Invasion

> *And it was, in the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. And he took the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the house of the king; and he took everything; and he took all the shields of gold which Solomon had made.* (1 Kings 14:25-26)

Shishak was Pharaoh Sheshonq I, who founded Egypt's Twenty-Second Dynasty. On a wall of the great temple of Amun at Karnak, in Egypt, Sheshonq carved a list of the towns he conquered in Canaan, including Megiddo, where a fragment of his victory monument was also found. The Bible and Egypt both remember the campaign.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that Shishak campaigned in Israel in the generation after Solomon.

## Study Questions

1. Why was the Tel Dan Stele such important evidence against the idea that David was a legend?
2. What does the Mesha Stele tell us about Omri and Israel's God?
3. Why do the radiocarbon dates from Khirbet Qeiyafa and Gezer matter?
4. How does Erez Ben-Yosef's work at the copper mines change how we think about the lack of buildings from early kingdoms?
5. Read 1 Kings 14:25-26. Why is it significant that Egypt remembered the same event?

# Chapter 9: Idols, Altars, and the Prophets' Warnings

> *He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah, and he crushed to pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel were burning incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan.*
>
> 2 Kings 18:4 (SLB)

If you read the books of Kings and the prophets straight through, one complaint comes up again and again. The people of Israel and Judah kept mixing the worship of the LORD with the worship of other gods. They built "high places," set up sacred pillars and wooden poles for the goddess Asherah, and burned incense to Baal and to "the queen of the heavens" (Jeremiah 44:17). Good kings like Hezekiah and Josiah tore those things down. Bad kings built them back up.

Some scholars once treated all of that as preaching, written long after the fact, with little real history behind it. Archaeology has turned up the altars, the idols, and even the graffiti. And it shows that the prophets were describing exactly what was going on.

## Balaam on a Plaster Wall

> *And he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, to Pethor, which **is** by the River, **in** the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying, "Look, a people has come out from Egypt; look, it has covered the eye of the land, and it is dwelling opposite me."* (Numbers 22:5)

In 1967, a Dutch team led by Henk Franken was excavating at Deir Alla in the Jordan Valley, in modern Jordan, when they found fragments of plastered wall with writing in red and black ink. When the pieces were put together, the text called itself the book of Balaam son of Beor and called him a seer of the gods. It describes a vision Balaam received at night from the gods, warning of disaster.

The inscription dates to around 800 B.C., centuries after the time of Moses. It doesn't tell the story found in Numbers 22 to 24. But it shows that Balaam son of Beor was remembered as a famous seer in the very region where the Bible places him, east of the Jordan. The plaster text is in the Jordan Archaeological Museum in Amman.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that Balaam son of Beor was a known figure in the region.

## Jeroboam's Altar at Dan

After Solomon died, the northern tribes broke away under Jeroboam. To keep his people from going to Jerusalem to worship, he set up two golden calves.

> *And the king took counsel and made two calves of gold, and he said to them, "**It is too** much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Look, your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" And he set the one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.* (1 Kings 12:28-29)

At Tel Dan, Avraham Biran's team, the same excavation that found the "House of David" stele, uncovered a large stone platform in a sacred area at the north end of the city, with steps, a courtyard, and the corner of a large horned altar, plus smaller altars and incense shovels. Biran identified it as the high place of Dan. Most archaeologists agree it was a major place of worship in the time of the kings of Israel. The golden calf itself, of course, was carried off or melted down long ago.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for a royal worship center at Dan.

## Ahab's House of Ivory

> *And the rest of the matters of Ahab, and all that he did, and the house of ivory which he built, and all the cities which he built, are they not written in the book of the matters of the days of the kings of Israel?* (1 Kings 22:39)

Ahab and his father Omri built Samaria as the capital of Israel. Excavations at Samaria by Harvard University in 1908 to 1910, and by a joint expedition led by John Crowfoot in 1931 to 1935, uncovered the royal quarter, with fine stonework, and hundreds of carved ivory pieces used to decorate furniture and walls. Many are in the Phoenician style, which fits Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, a princess of Sidon (1 Kings 16:31).

A century later, the prophet Amos thundered against the rich of Samaria, "those lying on beds of ivory" (Amos 6:4), while the poor were crushed. The ivories show what he was looking at.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## The LORD and His Asherah

At a remote desert way station called Kuntillet Ajrud in the northern Sinai, Israeli archaeologist Ze'ev Meshel excavated in 1975 and 1976 and found inscriptions and drawings on large storage jars and plastered walls, from around 800 B.C. Some of the inscriptions ask for a blessing "by YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah" and "by YHWH of Teman and his Asherah." A similar inscription turned up at Khirbet el-Qom, near Hebron.

These finds are uncomfortable, and that is exactly why they matter. They show some Israelites pairing the LORD with the goddess Asherah, as if He had a wife. That is the very sin the prophets condemned. The Bible never pretends Israel was faithful. It tells us plainly that the people "built for themselves high places and pillars and Asherim" (1 Kings 14:23). Kuntillet Ajrud shows the Bible told the truth about Israel's failures, not just its glories.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Hezekiah's Reform in Stone

The Bible says Hezekiah removed the high places, broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah (2 Kings 18:4). Several digs may show his reform, or Josiah's after him.

**Arad.** At the fortress of Arad, in the Negev desert of southern Judah, Yohanan Aharoni's excavations in the 1960s found a small temple with a holy room, a standing stone, and two stone incense altars. At some point the shrine was taken out of use and the altars were laid on their sides and buried. Scholars debate whether that happened under Hezekiah or Josiah. In 2020, researchers from Tel Aviv University and the Israel Museum analyzed residue on the two altars and found frankincense on one and cannabis on the other.

**Beersheba.** In 1973, Aharoni's team found the stones of a large horned altar at Beersheba, taken apart and reused in the wall of a storehouse. Someone had dismantled an altar that was no longer allowed.

**Lachish.** In 2016, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced that excavations by Sa'ar Ganor at the gate of Lachish had uncovered a shrine with two altars whose horns had been cut off. In the holy room, a stone toilet had been placed. The excavators linked it to Hezekiah's reform. It recalls what Jehu did to the temple of Baal in Samaria.

> *And they pulled down the sacred pillar of the Baal, and they pulled down the house of the Baal, and they made it into latrines until this day.* (2 Kings 10:27)

Some scholars question whether the stone was ever used as a toilet, or argue it was a symbolic act. But a shrine deliberately put out of use, with its altar horns cut away, fits the Bible's account well.

**Tel Eton (2026).** In 2026, Avraham Faust of Bar-Ilan University reported a standing stone at Tel Eton in the hills of Judah that had been deliberately covered over by a platform. He suggested it may reflect the same kind of reform.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that Judean shrines were taken out of use in the late 700s or 600s B.C. *Debated* for which king did it at each site.

## The Pool of Gibeon

One more find from this era is less about idols and more about a place. In 2 Samuel 2, the men of David and the men of Saul's son met at "the pool of Gibeon" and fought there (2 Samuel 2:13). From 1956 to 1962, American archaeologist James Pritchard excavated at el-Jib, north of Jerusalem. He found a huge round shaft cut into the rock, about 37 feet across, with a spiral staircase winding down to the water table. He also found dozens of jar handles stamped with the name *gb'n*, Gibeon. That settled the identification of the town.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for Gibeon. The pool's date is debated.

## The Fall of Nineveh

The prophet Nahum announced the fall of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, the empire that had crushed Israel and humbled Judah.

> *And it will be **that** all who see you will flee from you and say, "Nineveh is devastated; who will show sympathy to her?" From where shall I seek comforters for you?* (Nahum 3:7)

For centuries Nineveh's location was a mystery, buried under mounds across the Tigris River from Mosul in Iraq. In the 1840s, Austen Henry Layard and others began uncovering its palaces. A Babylonian tablet in the British Museum, the *Fall of Nineveh Chronicle*, records that the Babylonians and Medes captured and plundered the city in 612 B.C. In 2026, a study in the journal *Iraq* reported new evidence of that final battle at Nineveh's Shamash Gate.

The empire that seemed unstoppable in Hezekiah's day was gone less than a century later, just as the prophets said.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Study Questions

1. Why is it significant that Balaam son of Beor appears in an inscription from east of the Jordan?
2. Read 1 Kings 12:28-29. What did archaeologists find at Dan?
3. Why are the "YHWH and his Asherah" inscriptions uncomfortable, and why do they actually support the Bible's honesty?
4. Read 2 Kings 18:4. What finds at Arad, Beersheba, and Lachish may reflect reforms like Hezekiah's?
5. What does the fall of Nineveh teach us about the power of human empires?

# Chapter 10: Kings in Stone: Israel and Judah Under Assyria

> *And in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib the king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them.*
>
> 2 Kings 18:13 (SLB)

From the time of Ahab onward, the Bible's history runs straight into the records of the greatest empire of the day, Assyria. The Assyrians were proud, brutal, and very good at keeping records. Their kings carved their campaigns into stone, wrote them on clay prisms, and covered their palace walls with pictures of their victories. They had no reason to flatter Israel or Judah. And yet, over and over, they name the same kings, in the same order, doing the same things the Bible says.

I have worked in utility and infrastructure for about 40 years, so I appreciate what it took to cut a water tunnel through solid rock under the threat of siege. Hezekiah's tunnel in Jerusalem ties the account in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles to stone you can still walk through. Seeing Scripture match physical stone makes ancient history concrete.

## Ahab at the Battle of Qarqar

In 1861, British archaeologist John George Taylor found a stone monument near the town of Kurkh in southeastern Turkey. It records the campaigns of Shalmaneser III of Assyria, including a great battle at Qarqar in Syria in 853 B.C. against a coalition of western kings. Among them is "Ahab the Israelite," who brought 2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers, the largest chariot force in the coalition.

The Bible doesn't mention the battle of Qarqar. But it presents Ahab as a powerful king with a large army (1 Kings 20; 22), and Assyria confirms that he was. The Kurkh Monolith is in the British Museum.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Jehu Bows Down

In 1846, British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard found a black limestone pillar, about six and a half feet tall, at Nimrud in Iraq. It is called the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, and it is in the British Museum. One of its panels shows a man bowing with his face to the ground before the Assyrian king, while servants behind him carry gifts. The caption reads, "Tribute of Jehu, son of Omri."

Jehu was the army commander who seized the throne of Israel and wiped out Ahab's family (2 Kings 9 and 10). Assyrian records often called any king of Israel a "son of Omri," meaning "from the land of Omri," since Omri had founded Samaria. This is the only known picture of a king of Israel or Judah from his own lifetime.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Tiglath-pileser III and the Fall of Samaria

The Bible names an Assyrian king called Pul, who took tribute from King Menahem of Israel (2 Kings 15:19). For a while, scholars didn't know who Pul was. Babylonian records later showed that Pul was another name for Tiglath-pileser III, who ruled Assyria from 745 to 727 B.C. His own records list Menahem of Samaria among the kings who paid him tribute. They also name Pekah and Hoshea of Israel and Ahaz of Judah, all kings in 2 Kings 15 and 16.

His successors, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, besieged and captured Samaria in 722 to 720 B.C., and Sargon's inscriptions from his palace at Khorsabad boast that he carried off 27,290 people from Samaria. The Bible tells the same story in 2 Kings 17.

For a long time, Sargon was known from only one verse in the whole Bible, Isaiah 20:1, and some scholars doubted he was a real king. In 1843, French consul Paul-Emile Botta began digging at Khorsabad, north of Mosul, and found Sargon's palace.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Hezekiah and Sennacherib

Now we come to one of the best documented events in the whole Old Testament. In 701 B.C., Sennacherib, king of Assyria, invaded Judah.

> *And in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib the king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them. And Hezekiah the king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria, to Lachish, saying, "I have sinned; turn back from me. That which you put on me I will bear." And the king of Assyria imposed on Hezekiah the king of Judah approximately 22,500 pounds (three hundred talents) of silver and approximately 2,250 pounds (thirty talents) of gold.* (2 Kings 18:13-14)

Sennacherib told his side of the story too. Several clay prisms record his annals, including the Taylor Prism in the British Museum and copies in Chicago and Jerusalem. He says he captured 46 of Hezekiah's walled cities and shut Hezekiah up in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage." He lists the heavy tribute Hezekiah paid, including thirty talents of gold, the same number of gold talents the Bible gives.

But notice what Sennacherib does *not* say. He never claims he captured Jerusalem. For a king who bragged about everything, that silence is loud. The Bible tells us why: the angel of the LORD struck the Assyrian camp, and Sennacherib went home (2 Kings 19:35-36). Assyria doesn't mention that, of course. But it can't claim the city either.

Sennacherib was proudest of capturing Lachish, Judah's second city. He covered a whole room of his palace at Nineveh with stone carvings of the siege: battering rams on a ramp, archers, slingers, and the people of Lachish being led away. Layard found the reliefs in the 1840s, and they are now in the British Museum. At Lachish itself, archaeologists found the Assyrian siege ramp, one of the oldest and best preserved siege ramps ever excavated, along with hundreds of arrowheads and sling stones.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Hezekiah's Tunnel

To prepare for the Assyrian siege, Hezekiah cut a tunnel to bring water from the Gihon Spring, outside the city wall, into the city.

> *And he, Hezekiah, stopped up the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west of the city of David. And Hezekiah prospered in all his work.* (2 Chronicles 32:30)

The tunnel is still there. It runs about 1,750 feet (533 meters) through solid rock under the City of David, winding to the Pool of Siloam. You can wade through it today with a flashlight, in water up to your knees.

In 1880, a boy exploring the tunnel found an inscription carved into the wall near its southern end. It describes the moment two crews of workers, digging toward each other from opposite ends, heard each other's voices through the rock and broke through. It is one of the most important Hebrew inscriptions ever found. It was taken to Istanbul when the land was under Ottoman rule, and it is in the Istanbul Archaeology Museums today.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that the tunnel is real and from Hezekiah's era. (Some scholars have argued for a slightly different date, but most accept the link to Hezekiah.)

## Hezekiah's Own Seal

In 2009, Eilat Mazar's team was sifting dirt from the Ophel excavations, just south of the Temple Mount, when they found a tiny clay seal impression, called a *bulla*, about half an inch across. When it was finally read in 2015, it said: "Belonging to Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah." It shows a winged sun and two symbols of life. This is the first seal impression of an Israelite or Judean king ever found in a scientific excavation.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## New Finds in Jerusalem

Some of the most exciting work on this period has come out in just the last few years.

**The Uzziah earthquake and building work (2024).** The big radiocarbon study of Jerusalem published in 2024 used an earthquake in the 700s B.C. as one of its fixed points. That fits the earthquake that Amos and Zechariah remembered "in the days of Uzziah" (Amos 1:1; Zechariah 14:5). The study found that a major wall and building work on the eastern side of the City of David, which had long been credited to Hezekiah, most likely happened earlier, in the time of Uzziah. The Bible says Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem and strengthened them (2 Chronicles 26:9).

**The Siloam dam (2025).** In 2025, the same research group published radiocarbon dates from straw and twigs in the mortar of a huge stone dam at the Pool of Siloam. The dam dates to about 800 B.C., and the team linked its building to a period of drought followed by flash floods. In the Bible's timeline, that is the reign of Joash (also called Jehoash) or his son Amaziah, kings of Judah.

**Tax stamps (2024).** In 2024, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the excavation of two large government buildings at Mordot Arnona, south of Jerusalem, with about 180 stamped jar handles, many

of them stamped *lmlk*, Hebrew for "belonging to the king." They show a royal system for collecting goods in Judah during the time of Hezekiah and the Assyrian crisis.

**An Assyrian letter in Jerusalem (2025).** In October 2025, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced a tiny clay fragment, about an inch across, with Assyrian cuneiform writing, found in dirt from excavations near the Western Wall. Its clay comes from the region of the Tigris River in Iraq. Assyriologist Peter Zilberg of Bar-Ilan University read it as mentioning a delay in payment, the first day of the month of Av, and the title of an Assyrian officer. It dates from the late 700s to the mid-600s B.C., the era of Assyrian control over Judah. It doesn't name a king, and the exact year is lost, but it fits the world of 2 Kings 18, when Judah owed tribute to Assyria.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for all four, with the details still being studied.

## Study Questions

1. Why are Assyrian records such strong outside witnesses to the Bible's kings?
2. What does the Black Obelisk show, and why is it unique?
3. Compare 2 Kings 18:13-14 with Sennacherib's prism. What do they agree on? What does Sennacherib leave out?
4. Read 2 Chronicles 32:30. How does Hezekiah's tunnel confirm this verse?
5. Which of the recent Jerusalem finds most interests you, and why?

# Chapter 11: Exile and Return: Babylon and Persia

> *Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have taken hold of, to subdue nations before him, and I will loosen the loins of kings, to open doors before him, and gates will not be shut*
>
> Isaiah 45:1 (SLB)

In 586 B.C., the Babylonian army burned Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon and carried the people of Judah into exile. Seventy years later, the Persian king Cyrus let them go home. These were the darkest and most hopeful years in the Old Testament, and they have left more names in the ground than almost any other period.

## Letters From the Last Days of Judah

In 1935, British archaeologist James Leslie Starkey was digging in the gate area of Lachish when his team found a group of pottery fragments with ink writing on them. They are called *ostraca* (OSS-truh-kuh), and they were letters written by an officer at a small outpost to his commander at Lachish, in the last months before the Babylonians conquered Judah.

One of them, Lachish Letter 4, ends with a chilling line. The officer says they are watching for the fire signals of Lachish, "for we cannot see Azekah." Compare that with Jeremiah:

> *and the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and against Azekah; for they, they remained among the cities of Judah, cities of fortification.* (Jeremiah 34:7)

Jeremiah says that at one point only Lachish and Azekah were left standing. The officer at the outpost could no longer see Azekah's signal fire. Most scholars think it had already fallen. The Lachish Letters are in the British Museum and the Israel Museum.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that the letters are genuine and come from the Babylonian invasion. *Strong* for the reading about Azekah.

## The Men Around Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah is full of the names of royal officials. In the last forty years, archaeologists have found the names of several of them pressed into clay.

- **Gemariah son of Shaphan.** Jeremiah 36:10 says Baruch read Jeremiah's scroll in the chamber of "Gemariah the son of Shaphan the scribe." In 1982, Yigal Shiloh's excavations in the City of David found a burned layer from the Babylonian destruction with about fifty clay bullae. One of them reads "Belonging to Gemaryahu son of Shaphan."
- **Jucal son of Shelemiah** and **Gedaliah son of Pashhur.** Jeremiah 38:1 names both men among the officials who wanted Jeremiah thrown into a pit. In 2005 and 2008, Eilat Mazar's excavations in the City of

David found bullae of both men, a few yards apart: “Belonging to Yehukal son of Shelemyahu son of Shobi” and “Belonging to Gedalyahu son of Pashhur.”

- **Nebo-Sarsekim.** Jeremiah 39:3 lists the Babylonian officials who sat in the gate of Jerusalem after the city fell, including “Sarsechim the Rab-saris” (a high court title). In 2007, Michael Jursa of the University of Vienna was reading a small clay tablet in the British Museum, dated 595 B.C., and found a receipt for gold paid by “Nabu-sharrussu-ukin, the chief eunuch” of Nebuchadnezzar. That title is the Babylonian form of *Rab-saris*, and most scholars agree this is the same man. (The Bible’s list is hard to divide into names, so some scholars read the verse differently.)

> *And Shephatiah the son of Mattan, and Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, and Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words which Jeremiah was speaking to all the people, saying* (Jeremiah 38:1)

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for Gemariah, Jucal, and Gedaliah (found in controlled digs). *Strong* for Nebo-Sarsekim.

## The Fire of 586 B.C.

The Bible says the Babylonians burned the temple, the palace, and “every house of a great one” in Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:9). Archaeologists have found that fire again and again. In the City of David, the “Burnt Room” and “House of Ahiel” are thick with ash, arrowheads, and collapsed stone. In 2023, the Mount Zion excavation led by Shimon Gibson and Rafi Lewis reported both the Babylonian burn layer of 587/586 B.C. and the Roman destruction layer of A.D. 70, only a few meters apart. In July 2026, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced charred wooden beams from the Babylonian destruction in the Givati Parking Lot excavation in the City of David, with radiocarbon and tree-ring tests planned.

The 2024 Jerusalem radiocarbon study used the Babylonian destruction as one of its two fixed calendar points, because the Babylonian Chronicles give us the date.

## The Babylonian Chronicles

The *Babylonian Chronicles* are a series of clay tablets, most of them in the British Museum, that record the main events of each year in Babylon. One of them, known as ABC 5, says that in his seventh year, Nebuchadnezzar marched to the land of Hatti (Syria and Canaan), besieged “the city of Judah,” and on the second day of the month of Adar captured it, seized its king, and appointed a king of his own choosing.

That date works out to March 16, 597 B.C. It is the capture of King Jehoiachin, described in 2 Kings 24:10-17, when Nebuchadnezzar put Zedekiah on the throne. It is one of the few events in the Old Testament we can date to the exact day.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## King Jehoiachin’s Rations

The last verses of 2 Kings and of Jeremiah tell a quiet story of hope. In Babylon, the exiled King Jehoiachin was released from prison and given a regular food allowance from the king’s table for the rest of his life.

> *And it was in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin the king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-fifth of the month, Evil-merodach the king of Babylon, in the year of his kingship, lifted up the head of Jehoiachin the king of Judah, and he brought him out from the house of the prison. And he spoke good things with him, and he set his throne above the throne of the kings who **were** with him in Babylon. And he changed the clothes of his prison, and he ate bread before him continually all the days of his life. And his allowance, a continual allowance, was given to him from the king of Babylon, the portion of a day in its day, until the day of his death, all the days of his life.* (Jeremiah 52:31-34)

In the early 1900s, German archaeologists dug up a storeroom near the Ishtar Gate in Babylon and found ration tablets listing oil given to foreigners at the royal court. In 1939, Ernst Weidner published several that list rations for "Ya'ukin, king of the land of Yahud" and his five sons. Ya'ukin is the Babylonian spelling of Jehoiachin, and Yahud is Judah. The tablets are in the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## The Exiles at Home in Babylon

How did ordinary Judeans live in exile? Jeremiah told them to build houses, plant gardens, and seek the welfare of the city where God had sent them (Jeremiah 29:5-7). A group of about two hundred clay tablets, many from a village in Babylonia called *Al-Yahudu*, meaning "the town of Judah," shows exactly that. Published in 2014 by Laurie Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, they record leases, sales, and debts of Judean families from about 572 to 477 B.C., with names like Yahu-azar and Shalam-Yama built on the name of Israel's God. (Most of these tablets came through the antiquities market, which limits what we know about where exactly they were found, but experts accept them as genuine.)

## Belshazzar

Daniel 5 tells the story of Belshazzar's feast and the handwriting on the wall. For a long time, critics pointed to Belshazzar as proof that Daniel was written late by someone who didn't know Babylonian history. All the ancient Greek historians said the last king of Babylon was Nabonidus. No one had heard of Belshazzar.

In 1854, British consul J. E. Taylor found clay cylinders in the corners of the ziggurat at Ur. On them, Nabonidus prays for "Belshazzar, my firstborn son." Other tablets later showed that Nabonidus spent about ten years living in the Arabian oasis of Tayma, and left Belshazzar in charge in Babylon as co-ruler.

That explains a detail in Daniel 5 that is easy to miss. Belshazzar offered Daniel the position of "third in the kingdom" (Daniel 5:29). Why third? Because Nabonidus was first, and Belshazzar was second. Third was the highest place he had to give. A writer who didn't know Babylonian history wouldn't have gotten that right.

> *Then Belshazzar spoke, and they clothed Daniel **with** purple, and the necklace of gold **was** on his neck; and they proclaimed concerning him that he would be ruling **as** the third in the kingdom.* (Daniel 5:29)

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that Belshazzar was real and ruled Babylon in his father's place.

## Cyrus and the Return

In 1879, Hormuzd Rassam, working for the British Museum, found a clay barrel at Babylon now known as the **Cyrus Cylinder**. On it, Cyrus the Great of Persia describes how he took Babylon in 539 B.C. and says he returned the captured gods of various peoples to their temples and gathered their people and sent them home.

The cylinder doesn't mention the Jews by name. But it shows exactly the kind of policy Ezra 1 describes, when Cyrus allowed the Jews to return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

> *And in year one of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, and he caused a proclamation to pass through all his kingdom, and also in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of the heavens, has given to me, and He has appointed me to build for Him a house in Jerusalem, which **is** in Judah."* (Ezra 1:1-2)

**Evidence check:** *Strong.* The policy fits, though the cylinder names no specific nation in Judah's region.

## Sanballat and the High Priest

Nehemiah's enemies included Sanballat the Horonite (Nehemiah 2:19). In the 1890s and early 1900s, papyrus letters turned up at Elephantine, an island in the Nile in southern Egypt where a colony of Jewish soldiers lived in the 400s B.C. One letter, from 407 B.C., mentions "Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria," and also "Johanan the high priest" in Jerusalem. Johanan appears in Nehemiah 12:22 in the list of high priests.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## A New Name in 2025

In July 2025, the Temple Mount Sifting Project in Jerusalem announced a clay bulla, dated by its letters to the 600s or 500s B.C., reading "Belonging to Yedayah son of Asayahu." Asaiah was an official of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:12). The bulla came from dirt removed from the Temple Mount without archaeological supervision, so its exact layer is lost, and it may be a different Asaiah. I put it here as a possibility, not a proof.

**Evidence check:** *Debated.*

## Study Questions

1. How do the Lachish Letters fit Jeremiah 34:7?
2. Which officials from the Book of Jeremiah have been found on clay seal impressions?
3. Why is the Babylonian Chronicle's date of 597 B.C. so valuable?
4. Explain why Belshazzar offered Daniel the "third" place in the kingdom.
5. What do the Al-Yahudu tablets tell us about how the exiles lived?

# Part Four: Jesus and the Apostles in History

# Chapter 12: Jesus Outside the Bible

> *For the king knows about these things, to whom also I speak with boldness; for I am not persuaded that any of these things escapes his notice, not one; for this has not been done in a corner.*
>
> Acts 26:26 (SLB)

Every so often, someone on the internet says Jesus never existed. You might be surprised to learn that almost no historian who studies the ancient world agrees with that, whether they are Christian, Jewish, or atheist. The debate among scholars is not over whether Jesus lived. It is over who He was.

Bart Ehrman, a well-known scholar at the University of North Carolina who is not a believer, wrote a whole book on the question, *Did Jesus Exist?* (2012). His answer was yes. He wrote that Jesus "certainly existed," and that virtually every competent scholar of the ancient world agrees.

In this chapter I want to show you what writers outside the Bible said about Jesus and the first Christians. Most of them were not friendly to Christians, which makes them strong witnesses.

## Josephus

Flavius Josephus (about A.D. 37 to 100) was a Jewish priest and military commander who went over to the Romans during the Jewish war of A.D. 66 to 70. He spent the rest of his life in Rome writing histories of the Jewish people. He mentions Jesus twice in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, finished around A.D. 93 or 94.

The first is the short passage about James (Antiquities 20.200). Josephus says that the high priest Ananus brought before the Sanhedrin "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James," and had him stoned. Almost all scholars accept this passage as genuine. It confirms that Jesus had a brother named James (Galatians 1:19), that He was known as "Christ," and that James was killed in Jerusalem around A.D. 62.

The second is longer and more famous (Antiquities 18.63-64). It is called the *Testimonium Flavianum*, Latin for "the testimony of Flavius." In the form we have it, it describes Jesus as a wise man who did surprising works, was condemned to the cross by Pilate, and appeared alive to His followers on the third day.

Here I need to be honest. Most scholars think a Christian copyist added some phrases to this passage, such as "He was the Christ," because they sound like something a believing Christian would say, not a Jewish priest working for Rome. But most scholars also think Josephus did write a passage about Jesus here, because the style matches his writing and an Arabic version quoted in the 900s by a bishop named Agapius has a more modest form. If you take out the suspect phrases, what remains still says that Jesus was a wise man who did remarkable deeds, had many followers, was condemned to the cross by Pilate, and that His followers did not abandon Him.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for the James passage. *Strong* that Josephus mentioned Jesus in the longer passage, with some later Christian additions.

## Tacitus

Cornelius Tacitus (about A.D. 56 to 120) was a Roman senator and one of Rome's greatest historians. In his *Annals*, written around A.D. 116, he describes the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64, and says Nero blamed it on a group "hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace" (in the classic 1876 English translation by Alfred Church and William Brodribb).

Tacitus then explains who they were. In that same translation, "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus" (*Annals* 15.44). He calls Christianity "a most mischievous superstition," which tells you he was no friend of the faith.

In one sentence, a hostile Roman historian confirms that Jesus was executed, that it was under Pontius Pilate, that it was during the reign of Tiberius, and that His followers had spread to Rome by the 60s.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.* Almost all scholars accept the passage as genuine.

## Pliny the Younger

Pliny the Younger was the Roman governor of Bithynia, in northern Turkey, around A.D. 111 to 113. He wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan asking what to do with the Christians brought before him (*Letters* 10.96). He reported that they met on a fixed day before dawn, sang a hymn "to Christ as to a god," and promised each other not to steal, commit adultery, or break their word. He had executed those who refused to curse Christ.

Pliny shows that within about eighty years of the crucifixion, Christians in Turkey were worshiping Jesus as God, and dying for it.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Suetonius

The Roman historian Suetonius, writing around A.D. 120, says in his life of Emperor Claudius, in John Rolfe's 1914 translation, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome" (*Claudius* 25). Most scholars think "Chrestus" is a misspelling of Christus, and that the disturbances were arguments in the Jewish community over Jesus. Acts 18:2 says Aquila and Priscilla had come to Corinth "because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome."

**Evidence check:** *Strong*, though some scholars think Chrestus was a different person.

## Other Voices

- **Mara bar Serapion**, a Syrian, wrote a letter to his son sometime after A.D. 73, asking what good it did the Jews to execute their "wise king," since their kingdom was taken away soon after. He doesn't name Jesus, but most scholars think that is who he meant.
- **The Babylonian Talmud**, a collection of Jewish teaching put in writing over several centuries, says in one passage (Sanhedrin 43a) that "Yeshu" was hanged on the eve of Passover for practicing sorcery and leading Israel astray. It is a hostile and late source. But notice what it doesn't deny: that Jesus did unusual things, and that He was executed at Passover.
- **Thallus**, a historian of the first century, is quoted by the Christian writer Julius Africanus around A.D. 220 as explaining the darkness at the crucifixion as an eclipse of the sun. Africanus argued that couldn't be right, since Passover falls at full moon. Thallus's own writing is lost, so we only have this second-hand report.

## What the Outside Sources Tell Us

Put these sources together, and without opening the Bible, you can learn that Jesus was a Jewish teacher known as the Christ, that He had a brother named James, that He was known for remarkable deeds, that He was executed under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius, around the time of Passover, and that within a few decades His followers had spread across the Roman Empire, were worshiping Him as God, and were willing to die rather than deny Him.

That is a lot of agreement from people who had no interest in helping the church.

## Study Questions

1. Why is it significant that most of these outside sources were hostile to Christians?
2. What does Josephus's passage about James tell us about Jesus?
3. Why do scholars think some phrases in the Testimonium Flavianum were added later? Why do most still think Josephus mentioned Jesus?
4. What facts about Jesus can you get from Tacitus alone?
5. Read Acts 26:26. Why could Paul say that this "has not been done in a corner"?

# Chapter 13: Everyday Life in the Gospels

> *Now there were six stone water jars standing there according to the purification of the Jews, holding approximately 20 or 30 gallons (two or three metretes) apiece.*
>
> John 2:6 (SLB)

The Gospels are full of little details of daily life: the jars at a wedding, the coins in a widow's hand, the stone in front of a tomb, the names of ordinary people. These are the kinds of details a writer living far away, or a century later, would be likely to get wrong. Archaeology lets us check them.

## Stone Water Jars

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus turned water into wine using "six stone water jars ... according to the purification of the Jews" (John 2:6). Why stone? Why not clay, which was cheaper?

Jewish law in that period taught that clay pots could become ritually unclean and then had to be broken (Leviticus 15:12, which we will look at in Chapter 19), but stone vessels could not become unclean. So families who cared about purity used stone vessels for water and food. Archaeologists have found stone cups, bowls, and large jars all over Judea and Galilee from the first century, and they almost vanish after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the second Jewish revolt failed in A.D. 135.

Workshops where the vessels were made have also been found. In 2016, Yonatan Adler of Ariel University excavated a chalk quarry and stone vessel workshop at Reina in Galilee, only a few miles from where many place Cana. In February 2026, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced another stone vessel workshop in a cave on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem, discovered during an operation against antiquities robbers.

John's detail is exactly right for a Jewish home in Galilee in the time of Jesus, and only for that time.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Ritual Baths

The Gospels mention Jewish washing customs several times (Mark 7:3-4; John 3:25). Archaeologists have found hundreds of stepped ritual baths, called *mikvaot* (singular *mikveh*), from the time of Jesus. Many cluster around the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where pilgrims would immerse themselves before going up to worship. On the day of Pentecost, three thousand people were baptized in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41). Some have asked where so many could have been immersed. The many pools around the temple, including Siloam, offer one answer.

## Coins in the Gospels

When His enemies tried to trap Jesus with a question about taxes, He asked for a coin.

> *Should we give, or should we not give?" But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius, so that I may see* ***it****." And they brought* ***it****. And He says to them, "Whose* ***is*** *this image and the inscription?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." And Jesus, answering, said to them, "Give back the things of Caesar to Caesar, and the things of God to God." And they marveled at Him.* (Mark 12:15-17)

The denarius, a silver coin, was a day's wage for a laborer (Matthew 20:2). The common denarius of Tiberius Caesar carried his portrait and an inscription in Latin calling him "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, Augustus." Many have been found in Israel. To a Jew who took the commandment against images seriously, the coin itself made Jesus' point: it bears Caesar's image, so give it back to him. You bear God's image, so give yourself to God.

The poor widow put in "two lepta, which is a quadrans" (Mark 12:42). The lepton was the smallest bronze coin in circulation, and thousands have been found. Mark even explains its value in Roman terms for his readers, which many scholars see as a sign he was writing for Romans.

When the collectors of the temple tax asked Peter about Jesus, Jesus told him to catch a fish and he would find a *stater* in its mouth, enough to pay for both of them (Matthew 17:24-27). Silver coins minted in Tyre, worth four drachmas, were the standard coin for paying the temple tax because of their high silver content. They have been found in large numbers in Israel, including in hoards. This is also why there were money changers in the temple courts (Matthew 21:12). Pilgrims had to swap their local coins for the right kind.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## The Stone in Front of the Tomb

All four Gospels describe a large stone at the door of Jesus' tomb.

> *And Joseph, having taken the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his new tomb, which he had cut in the rock; and having rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, he went away.* (Matthew 27:59-60)

Hundreds of rock-cut tombs from the time of Jesus have been found around Jerusalem. Most were closed with a square stone block, like a plug. Amos Kloner, a leading expert on Jerusalem tombs, wrote in 1999 that of more than 900 tombs from the Second Temple period he knew of, only four had round rolling stones. Round stones were expensive and were used for the tombs of the wealthy.

That fits the Gospels exactly. Matthew says the tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, "a rich man" (Matthew 27:57), and that it was his own "new tomb, which he had cut in the rock." The Greek word the Gospels use for the stone being "rolled" can also describe moving a heavy block, so the stone may have been round or square. Either way, a man with means had his own new rock-cut tomb close to the city, and that is what archaeologists would expect.

## The Names in the Gospels

Here is one of the most interesting studies of the Gospels I know of. Tal Ilan, an Israeli scholar, collected every known name of a Jewish person in the land of Israel from 330 B.C. to A.D. 200, from tombs, ossuaries, documents, and writers like Josephus, about three thousand people in all. Her *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity* was published in 2002.

Richard Bauckham, a British New Testament scholar, compared her findings to the names in the Gospels and Acts in his book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006). The most common men's names in the land were Simon and Joseph, followed by names like Eleazar (Lazarus), Judah (Judas), John, and Jesus. The most common women's names were Mary and Salome. The Gospels have the same pattern. There are many Simons, so the Gospels have to say "Simon Peter," "Simon the Zealot," and "Simon the leper" to keep them apart. There are several Marys, so they say "Mary Magdalene" and "Mary the mother of James."

Why does that matter? Jewish names in Egypt or Rome followed a different pattern from names in the land of Israel. A writer making up a story far away would be unlikely to get the mix right, or to know that he needed to add a nickname to tell two Simons apart. The Gospels reflect the names of real people in Judea and Galilee in the first century.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.*

## Caesarea Philippi

Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do men say Me, the Son of Man, to be?" at Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Hermon in the far north (Matthew 16:13). Today it is called Banias. There, a large cave and spring was a center of worship of the Greek god Pan, with niches cut into the cliff for statues. Herod the Great built a temple to Caesar Augustus in the area, and his son Philip built up the city and named it after Caesar and himself. Excavations have uncovered the sanctuary, the city, and a palace.

It was there, in a place full of shrines to pagan gods and the emperor, that Peter confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

## The Synagogue of the Freedmen

In 1913, French archaeologist Raymond Weill found a Greek inscription in the City of David that records how a priest named Theodotus, son of Vettenos, built a synagogue "for the reading of the Law and the teaching of the commandments," with a guest house for visitors from abroad. Most scholars date it before A.D. 70. It is the clearest evidence that Jerusalem had synagogues in the time of Jesus and the apostles. Some scholars have wondered whether the family of Vettenos, which seems to have a Roman name, belonged to the "synagogue which is called of the Freedmen" mentioned in Acts 6:9. That is a guess, but the inscription itself is solid. It is in the Israel Museum.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for a synagogue in pre-70 Jerusalem.

## Study Questions

1. Why were stone jars, and not clay jars, used "according to the purification of the Jews"?

2. Read Mark 12:15-17. How does the coin itself make Jesus' point?

3. Why does a rolling stone fit the tomb of a rich man like Joseph of Arimathea?

4. What does the study of Jewish names tell us about the Gospels?

5. Why is it striking that Peter's confession happened at Caesarea Philippi?

# Chapter 14: The Gospels as Eyewitness Accounts

> *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative concerning the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from **the** beginning became eyewitnesses and servants of the word delivered **them** to us*
>
> Luke 1:1-2 (SLB)

In Chapter 12 we looked at what outsiders said about Jesus, and in the last chapter at the everyday details of the Gospels. Now I want to turn to the four Gospels themselves. A common claim today is that the Gospels are legends, written long after the fact by people who never met Jesus, and that the stories grew in the telling the way a fish story does. The question for this chapter is simple: do the Gospels look like that, or do they look like what their writers say they are, accounts that came from people who were there?

Translating the SLB meant comparing parallel passages across the four Gospels line by line. Small details in one Gospel quietly answer questions left open in another. Witnesses telling the truth rarely sound scripted. Their accounts fit together at the edges without trying.

## What the Writers Claim

The Gospel writers don't hide where their information came from. Luke says he wrote down what was handed on by "eyewitnesses and servants of the word," and that he had "followed all things carefully from the first" (Luke 1:2-3). John says about the crucifixion, "the ***one*** who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true" (John 19:35), and at the end of his Gospel, "This is the disciple who is testifying concerning these things and who wrote these things" (John 21:24).

> *This is the disciple who is testifying concerning these things and who wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true.* (John 21:24)

When the apostles chose a man to replace Judas, the rule was that he had to be someone who had been with them "beginning from the baptism of John until the day in which He was taken up from us" (Acts 1:22). Peter and John told the council in Jerusalem, "we are not able not to speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). From the very start, the Christian message was built on eyewitness testimony.

Of course, a claim isn't proof. Anyone can say "I was there." So let's look at the evidence that the claim is true.

## The Earliest Testimony About Who Wrote Them

The oldest statement we have about how the Gospels were written comes from Papias, a church leader in Hierapolis, in what is now western Turkey. He wrote in the early 100s, and he said he had made a point of asking people who had known the apostles what the apostles had said. His books are lost, but the church historian Eusebius quoted parts of them around A.D. 325 (*Church History* 3.39).

According to Papias, Mark had been Peter's interpreter, and he wrote down carefully what he remembered of Peter's teaching about the things Jesus said and did, though not always in order. Papias also said Matthew compiled the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew language. Later writers in the 100s, including Irenaeus of Lyon around A.D. 180, named the same four authors we know today: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Scholars debate how much weight to give Papias. But it's worth noticing that no early church ever credited the Gospels to anyone else. If you were making up names to give a book authority, you would pick Peter or James, not Mark and Luke, who weren't among the twelve apostles.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that the traditional authors were named very early. How much each author knew firsthand is still debated among scholars.

## The Names Fit the Time and Place

In the last chapter I described Tal Ilan's collection of about three thousand names of Jews who lived in the land of Israel between 330 B.C. and A.D. 200, and how Richard Bauckham compared it with the names in the Gospels and Acts in his book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006). The numbers are worth seeing side by side, because they bear directly on the question of eyewitnesses.

| Names | Share among Jews in the land of Israel | Share in the Gospels and Acts |
|---|---|---|
| Men named Simon or Joseph (the two most common) | 15.6 percent | 18.2 percent |
| Men with one of the 9 most common names | 41.5 percent | 40.3 percent |
| Women named Mary or Salome (the two most common) | 28.6 percent | 38.9 percent |

The match is close for men, and the two most common women's names show up even more often in the Gospels, partly because several Marys were among Jesus' closest followers. Peter J. Williams, a scholar at Tyndale House in Cambridge, makes the larger point in *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (2018): the Gospel writers use names the way people who knew the land and the time firsthand would use them.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.* Some scholars question how much the comparison proves, since the number of names in the Gospels is small.

## Little Details That Fit Together

Another kind of evidence is something called an "undesigned coincidence." The idea goes back to a British scholar, John James Blunt, who wrote a book about it in 1847, and it has been brought back recently by philosopher Lydia McGrew in *Hidden in Plain View* (2017). An undesigned coincidence is when one account leaves a small question hanging, and another account answers it without seeming to try. That's what you get when different people describe the same real events.

Here is one example. Before Jesus fed the five thousand, John tells us that Jesus turned to Philip and asked him where they could buy bread for the crowd (John 6:5). Why Philip? John doesn't say here. But much later, in a different story, John mentions in passing that Philip was "from Bethsaida" (John 12:21). And Luke, who never mentions Philip in this story, tells us that the feeding took place near a town called Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). Put them together, and it makes sense: Jesus asked the local man where to buy bread.

Here's another. Mark says Jesus had the people sit down "on the green grass" (Mark 6:39). Grass in that land is green only for a short time in the spring. Mark doesn't explain why the grass was green. But John, in his own account of the same miracle, says "the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near" (John 6:4). Passover comes in the spring. Neither writer seems to be fitting his story to the other's.

One example could be luck. But there are dozens of these across the Gospels and Acts. They look like the marks of real memory, not of someone making up a story.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* as a pattern. Each example by itself is small, and scholars debate how much each one proves.

## Details No One Would Invent

If the early church were making up stories to win people over, it did a strange job. The Gospels are full of details that made the disciples look bad and made the message harder to sell.

- The disciples are often slow, scared, and confused. Peter, the leader, denies Jesus three times.
- Jesus was crucified, the most shameful death in the Roman world. Paul admits that the cross was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23).
- Jesus' own family thought He was out of His mind (Mark 3:21), and His brothers did not believe in Him at first (John 7:5).
- The first witnesses to the empty tomb were women. In that culture, a woman's testimony counted for little in court. Josephus wrote that the testimony of women should not be accepted (*Antiquities* 4.219). If you were inventing the story, you would have had the men find the tomb first. We'll come back to this in Chapter 25.

Historians call this the test of embarrassment. People don't usually invent stories that make their own leaders look foolish.

## Witnesses Who Could Be Checked

The Gospels also name people who were still around to ask. Mark tells us that the man forced to carry Jesus' cross was "Simon, a Cyrenian, coming from ***the*** country, the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mark 15:21). Why mention his sons? Most likely because Mark's readers knew them. Paul sends greetings to a Rufus in Rome (Romans 16:13), and many scholars think he is the same man.

Paul does the same thing in 1 Corinthians 15, written around A.D. 54 or 55. He passes on a short summary of the faith that he says he himself had received: that Christ died, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to Peter, to the Twelve, and then to more than five hundred people at once.

> *After that He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some also have fallen asleep.* (1 Corinthians 15:6)

"The greater part remain until now." In other words, most of them are still alive, so go ask them. Even many scholars who are not believers agree that Paul received this summary within a few years of the crucifixion. That is far too early for a legend to grow up and replace the facts. We'll look at this summary again in the last chapter.

## When Were They Written?

Scholars give a range of dates. Many date Mark to around A.D. 65 to 70, Matthew and Luke to the 70s or 80s, and John to the 90s. Others argue for earlier dates. One reason is that the book of Acts, Luke's second volume, ends with Paul still alive under house arrest in Rome, around A.D. 62, and never mentions his death, the death of James in A.D. 62, or the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If Acts was written by then, Luke's Gospel came before it.

Either way, the Gospels were written within the lifetime of people who had seen Jesus. Compare that with the oldest surviving biographies of Alexander the Great, by Arrian and Plutarch, which were written more than 400 years after his death. Historians still use them, and they are right to.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that all four Gospels were written in the first century. The exact dates are *debated.*

## What This Means

None of this forces anyone to believe. But it shows that the Gospels are not the kind of books legends are made of. They name real places that have been found, real rulers who have turned up in stone, and real people with the right names for their time. Their details fit together without trying. They tell embarrassing things about their own heroes. And they were written while the witnesses were still alive.

Peter said it this way: "not having followed cleverly devised myths did we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but having become eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). The evidence says he was telling the truth.

## Study Questions

1. What do Luke 1:1-4 and John 21:24 tell us about how the Gospel writers saw their own work?
2. What did Papias say about how Mark's Gospel was written? Why does it matter that the early church named Mark and Luke as authors?
3. How do the names in the Gospels support the idea that they came from people who knew first-century Israel?
4. Explain one undesigned coincidence in your own words. Why is this kind of evidence hard to fake?
5. Why would the Gospel writers include details that made the disciples look bad? What does that tell you?

# Chapter 15: The Places of the Gospels

> *Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep **Gate** a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porches.*
>
> John 5:2 (SLB)

The Gospels are full of places: towns, pools, roads, synagogues, and the temple itself. Many of them have been found, and some of the details the Gospel writers mention, details a forger living far away and much later would never have known, have turned out to be exactly right.

## The Pool With Five Porches

John 5 tells of a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years, lying by a pool in Jerusalem called Bethesda, which had "five porches." Five is an odd number for a pool. Most pools are four-sided. For a long time, some scholars took the five porches as a symbol, perhaps of the five books of Moses, and doubted John was describing a real place.

In the late 1800s and through the 1950s and 1960s, excavations near the Church of St. Anne, just north of the Temple Mount, uncovered a large double pool, two basins side by side with a wall between them. Colonnades on the four sides plus one across the middle make five. The site is near the Sheep Gate, just as John says.

Scholars still discuss exactly how the porches were laid out, and the site also had a later healing shrine to the Greek god Asclepius. But John was describing a real pool in a real place.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.*

## The Pool of Siloam

In John 9, Jesus spat on the ground, made mud, put it on a blind man's eyes, and said, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (John 9:7).

For centuries, visitors were shown a small pool at the end of Hezekiah's tunnel, built in Byzantine times. In 2004, workers repairing a sewer pipe in the City of David uncovered stone steps. Archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron were called in, and they found the edge of a large pool from the time of Jesus, with wide stone steps leading down into the water. Coins in the plaster dated it to the first century B.C. and the first century A.D.

Since 2022, the City of David Foundation and the Israel Antiquities Authority have been uncovering the rest of the pool, and in 2025 published the radiocarbon date for its dam (Chapter 10). The pool was fed by the water from Hezekiah's tunnel and was likely used by pilgrims to wash before going up to the temple along a stepped street, which has also been excavated.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.*

## The Temple and Its Warning

Herod the Great began rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem around 20 to 19 B.C. The Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70, as Jesus had said they would (Matthew 24:1-2). Huge stones from the top of the Temple Mount walls still lie where they fell on the street below the southwest corner.

In 1871, Charles Clermont-Ganneau found a limestone block with a Greek inscription warning foreigners not to go past the barrier into the inner courts of the temple, on pain of death. A second, broken copy was found in 1935. Paul was nearly killed in the temple because a crowd thought he had brought a Gentile past that line (Acts 21:28-29), and Paul may have had that barrier in mind when he wrote that Christ broke down "the middle wall of the barrier" between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14). The complete inscription is in the Istanbul Archaeology Museums.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Nazareth

Some skeptics have argued that Nazareth didn't exist in Jesus' day. It isn't mentioned in the Old Testament, in Josephus, or in the Talmud. But excavations have shown it was a small Jewish village in the first century.

In 2009, Yardenna Alexandre of the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the excavation of a house from the time of Jesus near the Church of the Annunciation, with pottery from the period and a hidden pit that may have been used in the Jewish revolt. Ken Dark of the University of Reading has studied another first-century house under the Sisters of Nazareth convent. The village was small, perhaps a few hundred people, which fits Nathanael's question, "Can any good thing be out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* that Nazareth was a village in Jesus' time.

## Capernaum and Peter's House

Jesus made Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee His home base (Matthew 4:13). Franciscan archaeologists excavated the town in the 1960s. They found a white limestone synagogue from the 300s or 400s A.D., built on top of a black basalt foundation that many scholars date to the first century, the synagogue where Jesus taught.

A few steps away, under the remains of an eight-sided church from the 400s A.D., they found a simple house from the first century. In the late first century, one room was set apart, its walls plastered, and later visitors scratched prayers on the plaster that mention Jesus and Peter. The early Christians there believed it was the house of Peter, where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31).

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for the synagogue foundation. *Debated* but reasonable for Peter's house.

## Magdala

In 2009, while digging to build a guest house on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority uncovered a first-century synagogue at Magdala, the hometown of Mary

Magdalene. Inside was a carved stone block, now called the Magdala Stone, with one of the oldest carvings of the seven-branched temple menorah ever found. The synagogue was in use in the time of Jesus, who "was going around all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues" (Matthew 4:23).

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for a synagogue in use in Jesus' day in a town He likely visited.

## A Boat From the Sea of Galilee

In 1986, after a long drought dropped the level of the Sea of Galilee, two brothers from Kibbutz Ginosar noticed the outline of an ancient boat in the mud. Archaeologists carefully lifted it out. It is about 27 feet long and 7.5 feet wide, made of many kinds of wood patched over and over. Pottery and radiocarbon dating put it between about the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. It could hold about a dozen people. It is the kind of boat the disciples used, and it is on display at the Yigal Allon Center at Kibbutz Ginosar.

No one can say it belonged to the disciples, and the museum doesn't claim that. But it shows us what their boats were like.

## Bethsaida

Bethsaida was the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip (John 1:44). Two sites near the north end of the Sea of Galilee have been proposed. Since 2016, a team led by Mordechai Aviam of Kinneret College and R. Steven Notley of Nyack College has dug at a site called el-Araj. They have found a Roman-era town, a Byzantine church that may be the one an early pilgrim said was built over the house of Peter and Andrew, and, in 2023, an inkwell in a first-century fisherman's house. In 2026 they reported more first-century lamps and fishing weights.

Another team has argued for a different site, et-Tell. The question isn't settled, but el-Araj has gained ground in recent years.

**Evidence check:** *Debated.*

## The Garden and the Tomb

John is the only Gospel writer who mentions a garden at the place of the crucifixion.

> *Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. Therefore there, because of the Preparation of the Jews, since the tomb was near, they laid Jesus.* (John 19:41-42)

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem stands over the traditional sites of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The location goes back at least to the 320s A.D., when Emperor Constantine had a Roman temple removed and found a rock-cut tomb underneath, as the historian Eusebius describes. Archaeologists agree the area was a quarry outside the city walls in Jesus' day, with rock-cut tombs from the first century, which fits the Gospels' description of a burial place just outside the city.

Since 2022, while the church floor was being renovated, a team led by Francesca Romana Stasolla of Sapienza University of Rome has been excavating under it. In 2025, she reported that plant remains and pollen from layers beneath the floor showed that olive trees and grapevines had been grown there, in plots divided by low stone walls, before the church was built. Radiocarbon dates were still to come.

Stasolla herself has been careful to say this doesn't prove the tomb is Jesus' tomb. No inscription will ever say that. But it does show that the area John describes, with a garden near tombs just outside the city, matches what is under the church.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that the area fits John's description. *Debated* whether this is the exact tomb, though many scholars think the tradition is reliable.

## Study Questions

1. Why was the discovery of a double pool with five porches important for John 5?
2. What did workers find in 2004 in the City of David?
3. Read Ephesians 2:14. How does the temple warning inscription help us picture what Paul meant?
4. Why does the size of Nazareth fit John 1:46?
5. What did the Holy Sepulchre excavations find, and why is the lead archaeologist careful about what it proves?

# Chapter 16: The People Who Judged Jesus

> *And immediately, in the morning, the chief priests, having held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council, having bound Jesus, led **Him** away and delivered **Him** to Pilate.*
>
> Mark 15:1 (SLB)

On the night Jesus was arrested, He was taken first to the high priest's house, then before the council, then to the Roman governor, then to Herod Antipas, and back to the governor. Almost every one of the men who held power over Him that night has left a trace outside the Bible.

## Pontius Pilate

Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from about A.D. 26 to 36. Josephus and the Jewish writer Philo both describe him, and Tacitus names him as the one who executed Christ (Chapter 12). But until 1961, there was no physical object with his name on it.

That year, an Italian team led by Antonio Frova was excavating the Roman theater at Caesarea Maritima, the Roman capital of Judea on the Mediterranean coast. They found a limestone block that had been reused as a step in a later rebuilding. On it is a Latin inscription saying that Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea, dedicated a building called the *Tiberieum*, likely in honor of Emperor Tiberius.

The inscription also settled a small question. Tacitus called Pilate a *procurator*, a title used for later governors. The stone shows Pilate's official title was *prefect*, a military title used for governors of Judea in his day. The Gospels simply call him "governor" (for example, Matthew 27:2), which fits either one.

The original Pilate Stone is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and a copy stands at Caesarea.

In 2018, scholars announced that a small copper-alloy ring found in 1968 or 1969 at Herodium, Herod's fortress near Bethlehem, had been cleaned and photographed, revealing the Greek word *Pilatus* around a picture of a wine vessel. It was probably a simple seal ring used by an official in Pilate's administration, or perhaps by another man named Pilate, since cheap rings like this were not the kind a governor would wear.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for the Pilate Stone. *Debated* for whose ring it was.

## Caiaphas the High Priest

> *And those who had seized Jesus led **Him** away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled.* (Matthew 26:57)

Joseph Caiaphas was high priest from about A.D. 18 to 36. Josephus names him. In November 1990, workers building a water park in the Peace Forest south of Jerusalem's Old City broke into a burial cave from the first century. Inside were twelve limestone bone boxes, called *ossuaries* (OSS-yoo-air-eez), used to store bones after a body had decayed.

One of them, beautifully decorated, had the name "Joseph son of Caiaphas" scratched on it twice, in Aramaic. Inside were the bones of a man about sixty years old, along with the bones of women and children. Zvi Greenhut of the Israel Antiquities Authority, who excavated the tomb, and most other scholars think this is the family tomb of the high priest who handed Jesus over to Pilate. A few scholars have questioned the reading of the name.

The Caiaphas ossuary is in the Israel Museum.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.*

## Annas

Annas was high priest from about A.D. 6 to 15, and the father-in-law of Caiaphas (John 18:13). Even after he left office, he remained powerful, and five of his sons became high priest. Luke calls him "the high priest" alongside Caiaphas (Luke 3:2; Acts 4:6). Josephus confirms the family and its power (*Antiquities* 20.198). Josephus also says that one of those sons, Ananus, was the high priest who had James, the brother of Jesus, put to death (Chapter 12).

## Herod the Great and His Sons

Herod the Great ruled Judea as king under Rome from 37 to 4 B.C. He was the king who tried to kill the baby Jesus (Matthew 2). His building projects are everywhere in Israel: the Temple Mount platform, the palace-fortresses of Masada and Herodium, and the harbor city of Caesarea.

In 2007, Ehud Netzer of the Hebrew University announced that he had found Herod's tomb on the slope of Herodium, with the remains of a broken red limestone sarcophagus. Netzer died in a fall at the site in 2010. Some scholars have since questioned whether the tomb was Herod's, so I'll mark it as debated. But Herod himself is one of the best documented rulers of the ancient world.

His son **Herod Antipas**, who ruled Galilee and had John the Baptist beheaded (Mark 6:14-29), built the city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, and coins with his name have been found. Jesus called him "this fox" (Luke 13:32). Pilate sent Jesus to him during the trial (Luke 23:6-12).

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for Herod and Antipas. *Debated* for Herod's tomb.

## What Crucifixion Looked Like

The Romans crucified thousands of people, but for a long time almost no physical evidence of it had been found. The bodies were often left for animals or thrown into common graves, and the nails were usually pulled out and reused.

In 1968, Vassilios Tzaferis excavated tombs at Givat HaMivtar in north Jerusalem and found an ossuary with the bones of a man named Yehohanan, from the first century. His right heel bone still had an iron nail driven through it, about four and a half inches long, with bits of wood still stuck to it. The nail had bent when it hit a knot in the wood of the cross, and they couldn't pull it out, so it was buried with him.

This find shows that the Romans did nail people to crosses in Judea in the time of Jesus, and that a crucified Jewish man could be given a proper family burial, which is exactly what Joseph of Arimathea gave Jesus (Mark 15:42-46).

In 2017, archaeologists in England found a similar heel bone with a nail through it at Fenstanton, near Cambridge, from the Roman period. It was published in 2021 and is one of only a handful of examples known anywhere.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Quirinius and the Census

I should mention one passage where scholars still argue. Luke says Jesus was born during a registration "while Quirinius was governing Syria" (Luke 2:2). Josephus says Quirinius became governor of Syria in A.D. 6 and took a census of Judea then. But Jesus was born before Herod the Great died in 4 B.C.

Bible scholars have suggested several answers. Luke's Greek can be read as "before Quirinius was governing," a census before the famous one. Quirinius may have held an earlier command in the region. Or the registration may have started under Herod and been completed later. None of these answers has settled the question for everyone.

I put this here because I don't want to hide the hard places. Luke has proven accurate in so many other details that I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I won't tell you the problem has been solved by a discovery. It hasn't.

**Evidence check:** *Debated.*

## Study Questions

1. What did the Pilate Stone add to what we knew about Pilate?
2. Why is the Caiaphas ossuary significant? Read Matthew 26:57.
3. What does the heel bone of Yehohanan show about crucifixion and burial?
4. Read Mark 15:42-46. How does the burial of Yehohanan help us understand Joseph of Arimathea's action?
5. Why is it important to admit hard questions like the census of Quirinius?

# Chapter 17: Paul's World and the Book of Acts

> *But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and led him to the judgment seat*
>
> Acts 18:12 (SLB)

The Book of Acts is a travel story. Luke takes us from Jerusalem to Antioch, across Turkey and Greece, and finally to Rome, with stops in dozens of cities. Along the way he names governors, local officials, and city titles. The Roman Empire was not uniform. Each city and province had its own titles for its officials, and those titles changed over time. A writer who got them right, over and over, had to know the world he was describing.

Translating Acts for the SLB, I noticed how Luke uses the right local title for officials in city after city across different Roman provinces. Someone writing much later without being there would have a hard time keeping those straight. Luke's accuracy on small details shows he knew the ground he wrote about.

## Gallio and the Date of Paul in Corinth

In Corinth, Paul's opponents dragged him before "Gallio" when he "was proconsul of Achaia" (Acts 18:12). Gallio was the older brother of the famous Roman philosopher Seneca.

In the early 1900s, at Delphi in Greece, archaeologists pieced together fragments of a letter from Emperor Claudius carved in stone, which names "Junius Gallio, my friend, and proconsul" of Achaia. The letter is dated to the period of Claudius's 26th acclamation as emperor, which places it in A.D. 52. Since proconsuls usually served for one year, Gallio was in office around A.D. 51 to 52.

This is one of the most important finds for the New Testament, because it gives us a fixed date for Paul's time in Corinth, and from that, scholars can work out the rough timeline of his whole ministry and letters.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## The Politarchs of Thessalonica

In Thessalonica, a mob dragged Paul's friend Jason before the city officials (Acts 17:6). The Greek word Luke uses is *politarchas*, "rulers of the city." This word is not found in the classical Greek writers, and some critics once suggested Luke had made it up or used it wrongly.

In the 1800s, a stone inscription from a Roman arch in Thessalonica, called the Vardar Gate, was found to begin with a list of the city's *politarchs*. It is now in the British Museum. Since then, dozens of inscriptions with the title have been found, most of them from Macedonia and many from Thessalonica itself. Luke used exactly the right local title.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed.*

## Erastus of Corinth

Paul sent greetings to the church in Rome from Corinth, including "Erastus, the steward of the city" (Romans 16:23). In 1929, archaeologists working near the theater in Corinth found a stone pavement with a Latin inscription saying that Erastus, in return for being made *aedile* (a city official in charge of public works and streets), had laid the pavement at his own expense. It dates to the first century.

Is it the same Erastus? Many scholars think so. Others note that the Greek title Paul uses (*oikonomos*, "steward" or "treasurer") isn't exactly the same as aedile, and the name was fairly common. Either way, a public official named Erastus served Corinth in the first century.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that an Erastus held city office in Corinth. *Debated* whether he is Paul's Erastus.

## Sergius Paulus

On the island of Cyprus, Paul met "the proconsul Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man" (Acts 13:7), who believed after seeing Paul's message confirmed (Acts 13:12). Luke is right that Cyprus was governed by a proconsul at that time. It had become a senatorial province, governed by proconsuls, in 22 B.C.

An inscription found in Rome in 1887 near the Tiber names a Lucius Sergius Paullus as one of the officials in charge of the riverbanks during the reign of Claudius. Some scholars think he is the same man, or from the same family. Other inscriptions from Cyprus and from Pisidian Antioch in Turkey name members of the Sergius Paullus family. The family was real and important. Whether any of these inscriptions name the exact man Paul met is still argued.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for the family. *Debated* for the exact individual.

## Ephesus

In Ephesus, a silversmith named Demetrius started a riot because Paul's preaching was hurting the business of making silver shrines of the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:23-41). The crowd rushed into the theater and chanted "Great ***is*** Artemis of ***the*** Ephesians!" for two hours (Acts 19:34).

The ruins of the theater at Ephesus are still there, and it held around 24,000 people. Inscriptions from Ephesus mention silversmiths, the town clerk (Acts 19:35), and the Asiarchs (Acts 19:31), leading men of the province. Ephesus was proud to be "temple-keeper" of Artemis, as the town clerk says, and coins and inscriptions use that very title, *neokoros*. The great Temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. The site was found in 1869 by British engineer John Turtle Wood after years of searching.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for the setting and titles.

## Colin Hemer's List

In 1989, British scholar Colin Hemer published a detailed study called *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*. He went through Acts chapter by chapter and listed the details, especially in the second half of the book, that can be checked against inscriptions, coins, and other ancient writings: titles,

place names, sea routes, local customs, and the kind of weather a ship would face on a given route. He found Luke accurate in detail after detail. For example, Luke calls Publius "the leading man of the island" of Malta (Acts 28:7), and inscriptions from Malta use that same title, "first man."

Hemer's book is technical, but it is the best answer to anyone who says Acts was written by someone far away and long after the events.

## New Finds From Paul's World

**Colossae (2025).** Paul wrote a letter to the church at Colossae in western Turkey, but the city itself had never been systematically excavated. In 2025, Turkish archaeologists began the first full excavation and reported a large burial ground with dozens of rock-cut tombs, with the dating still preliminary.

**Laodicea (2026).** Laodicea, near Colossae, is one of the seven churches in Revelation 3. Turkish excavations there have uncovered streets, churches, theaters, and, in 2026, a marble statue of Athena dated to the time of Augustus. The city's water came by aqueduct from springs miles away, and arrived lukewarm, which many believe is the background to Jesus' words about the church being "neither cold nor hot" (Revelation 3:15-16).

**A silver amulet in Germany (2024).** In December 2024, the city of Frankfurt, Germany, announced a remarkable find. A tiny silver capsule, about an inch and a half long, had been found in 2018 in the grave of a man buried around A.D. 230 to 260 in a Roman town called Nida. Inside was a rolled-up silver foil too fragile to open. In 2024, scientists at the Leibniz Center for Archaeology in Mainz used a CT scanner to "unroll" it digitally. The Latin text calls on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and quotes Philippians 2:10-11.

> *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of **those** in heaven and **those** on earth and **those** under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ **is** Lord, to **the** glory of God **the** Father.* (Philippians 2:10-11)

Experts have called it one of the earliest material traces of Christianity north of the Alps. And notice what it shows. Within two centuries of Paul writing to the Philippians, a man buried on the edge of the Roman Empire in Germany wore these words around his neck, confessing Jesus as Lord.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for the amulet and its text.

## Study Questions

1. Why is the Gallio inscription so important for dating Paul's ministry?
2. What were the politarchs, and why did their title once seem like a problem?
3. Read Acts 19:23-41. What details in the story have been confirmed at Ephesus?
4. What does it tell you about Luke as a writer that he gets local titles right?
5. Read Philippians 2:10-11. Why is it moving that these words were found in a grave in Germany from the third century?

# Chapter 18: The Seven Churches of Revelation

> *I, John, who **am** also your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and in the kingdom and endurance **of** Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos because of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus Christ.*
>
> Revelation 1:9 (SLB)

The Book of Revelation opens with seven short letters from the risen Jesus to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey (Revelation 2 and 3). People often treat Revelation as a book of symbols and visions only. But these seven letters are written to real cities, and they are full of local details that archaeology and ancient history have brought to life.

The great study of this subject is Colin Hemer's *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (1986), building on the work of William Ramsay a century earlier. Some of the connections they drew are certain. Some are suggestions. I'll tell you which is which.

Serving as a lay pastor and leading Bible studies showed me how easy it is for a church to stay busy while its first love cools. The warning to Ephesus in Revelation 2 is the one I take most to heart. Good programs and hard work never replace real devotion to Christ.

## Ephesus

We visited Ephesus in Chapter 17. It was the greatest city of the province, home to the Temple of Artemis and a population often estimated at a quarter of a million. Excavations by Austrian archaeologists, which have gone on since 1895, have uncovered its theater, its marble streets, its library, and its harbor, which was slowly silting up, a problem the city fought for centuries. Jesus told this church that it had left its first love (Revelation 2:4).

## Smyrna

Smyrna is modern Izmir. Its ancient marketplace, the agora, has been excavated in the middle of the city. Jesus warned the church at Smyrna that they would suffer.

> *Fear nothing of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to cast **some** of you into prison, so that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful to death, and I will give you the crown of life.* (Revelation 2:10)

About sixty years later, around A.D. 155, the elderly bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was burned to death in the city's stadium for refusing to call Caesar "Lord." A letter written by his church, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, records his famous answer. In the classic English translation of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, he said, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

## Pergamum: Where Satan's Throne Is

> *I know your works, and where you dwell, where the throne of Satan **is**; and you hold fast My name and did not deny My faith, even in the days in which Antipas **was** My faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.* (Revelation 2:13)

Pergamum stood on a steep hill and was full of temples. It had a great altar of Zeus, whose carved frieze was taken to Berlin in the 1800s and rebuilt in the Pergamon Museum. It had a famous healing sanctuary of Asclepius, whose symbol was a serpent. And it was the first city in the province to build a temple to the worship of the living Roman emperor, in 29 B.C.

Which of these was "the throne of Satan"? Scholars disagree. Many favor the emperor worship, because that was what could get a Christian like Antipas killed. Others point to the altar of Zeus, which looks like a throne on the hill. Either way, the letter fits a city where pagan worship was everywhere and refusing to join in was dangerous.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for the temples. *Debated* for which one Jesus meant.

## Thyatira

Thyatira was a smaller city known for its trade guilds. Inscriptions found there mention guilds of wool workers, linen workers, leather workers, potters, bakers, slave dealers, bronze smiths, and dyers. In Acts 16:14, Paul's first convert in Europe was Lydia, "a seller of purple" from Thyatira.

Each guild had its own patron god and held feasts in that god's honor. A Christian who refused to attend could lose his livelihood. That background helps explain the letter's warning about a false prophetess who taught believers to "eat things sacrificed to idols" (Revelation 2:20). Jesus also describes Himself to Thyatira as having feet "like fine bronze" (Revelation 2:18), and inscriptions show a bronze workers' guild there.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for the guilds.

## Sardis: Like a Thief

> *Be watching, and strengthen the things that remain, which are about to die; for I have not found your works completed before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and keep **it**, and repent. If therefore you do not watch, I will come upon you like a thief, and you will by no means know at what hour I will come upon you.* (Revelation 3:2-3)

Sardis had been the capital of the rich kingdom of Lydia, and its citadel sat on a high cliff that looked impossible to attack. Yet it was taken twice by surprise because no one was watching. The Greek historian Herodotus tells how Cyrus the Great captured it in 547 B.C. when a soldier saw a defender climb down a crack in the cliff, and Antiochus III took it in a similar way in 214 B.C. The warning "If therefore you do not watch, I will come upon you like a thief" would have stung in Sardis.

In A.D. 17, a great earthquake struck Sardis and other cities of the region, and Tacitus says Emperor Tiberius gave Sardis large aid to rebuild (*Annals* 2.47). Excavations by Harvard and Cornell since 1958 have uncovered the city, including a huge synagogue from a later period, one of the largest ever found.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for Sardis's history. The link to the letter's wording is a reasonable inference.

## Philadelphia: A New Name and a Pillar

> *The one who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will by no means go out anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.* (Revelation 3:12)

Philadelphia was also hit by the earthquake of A.D. 17, and the Greek geographer Strabo, writing around that time, said the city's walls were never safe from aftershocks, and that many people lived out in the country rather than in town. After the quake, the city took a new name, Neocaesarea, in honor of the emperor who helped it rebuild.

Picture a church in a city where people fled outside the walls whenever the ground shook, where buildings fell, and where the city's name had been changed to honor Caesar. Jesus promised them they would be a pillar that stands, that they would "by no means go out anymore," and that He would write on them a new name, His own.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* for the history. The connection to the letter is Hemer's suggestion, and a good one.

## Laodicea: Rich, Lukewarm, and Blind

> *Because you say, 'I am rich, and I have become rich, and I have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are the wretched **one** and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, so that you may become rich, and white garments, so that you may be clothed and the shame of your nakedness may not be made manifest; and anoint your eyes **with** eye salve, so that you may see.* (Revelation 3:17-18)

Laodicea was a wealthy banking and manufacturing city. When an earthquake struck in A.D. 60, Tacitus says the city rebuilt from its own resources, without help from Rome (*Annals* 14.27). It was proud that it needed nothing.

It was known for a soft black wool, and the region was famous for a medicine for the eyes. Ancient medical writers, including the famous doctor Galen, mention a Phrygian remedy for the eyes, and the geographer Strabo mentions a well-known school of medicine near Laodicea. Jesus' counsel to buy white garments and eye salve from Him hit the city right where it was proudest.

Laodicea had no good water supply of its own. Water came by aqueduct from springs several miles away, and the pipes that have been found are thick with mineral deposits. Its neighbor Hierapolis, across the valley, had famous hot springs, and Colossae nearby had cold, fresh water. Many scholars believe that is

the background of Jesus' words: "you are neither cold nor hot" (Revelation 3:15). Hot water heals. Cold water refreshes. Lukewarm, mineral-heavy water is good for neither.

Turkish archaeologists led by Celal Simsek have excavated Laodicea since 2003 and uncovered streets, theaters, temples, and an early church, and in 2026 they reported a marble statue of Athena from the time of Augustus.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.*

## What the Seven Letters Show

These letters were not written by someone who had never been to Asia. They are aimed, city by city, at real people facing real pressures: guild feasts in Thyatira, emperor worship in Pergamum, earthquakes in Philadelphia, banking pride in Laodicea. The details fit. And the same risen Lord who knew those cities knows ours.

The letters also point forward. They close the first part of Revelation, before John hears a voice saying "Come up here" (Revelation 4:1) and the scene moves to heaven. As I explain in my Revelation study, I believe the church will be caught up to meet the Lord before the time of tribulation on earth that follows. But the call to each church stands for us now: "The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

## Study Questions

1. Why is it significant that the seven letters of Revelation are written to real cities?
2. What happened to Polycarp of Smyrna, and how does it relate to Revelation 2:10?
3. Read Revelation 3:2-3. Why would "I will come upon you like a thief" mean so much in Sardis?
4. How do Laodicea's wealth, wool, eye medicine, and water supply help explain Revelation 3:15-18?
5. Which of the seven letters speaks most to your own church today?

# Part Five: Health, Science, and the Natural World

# Chapter 19: A Clean Camp: Germs Before Anyone Knew About Germs

> *And He said, "If you will surely listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what **is** right in His eyes, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, all the sickness which I put on Egypt I will not put on you; for I **am** the LORD who heals you."*
>
> Exodus 15:26 (SLB)

Picture a delivery room in 1846. The doctor comes straight from the autopsy room, where he has been cutting into the body of a woman who died of fever. He doesn't wash his hands. Nobody does. Nobody knows there is any reason to. He delivers a baby, and a few days later the mother is dead of the same fever.

That really happened, over and over, in one of the finest hospitals in Europe. And it is the best way I know to show you how far ahead of its time the Law of Moses was.

## What People Believed About Disease

For most of history, people had no idea that tiny living things cause disease. The most common medical idea in Europe, handed down from the Greek doctors Hippocrates and Galen, was that illness came from an imbalance of four fluids in the body, called humors. Another popular idea was that disease spread through *miasma*, bad air from rotting things. Bacteria were first seen under a microscope by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek in the 1670s, but no one connected them with disease for almost two hundred years.

Egypt, where Israel had lived for centuries, had some of the most advanced medicine of the ancient world. But look at what it was. The **Ebers Papyrus**, a medical scroll from around 1550 B.C. now in the library of the University of Leipzig, contains several hundred remedies and spells. Some of its treatments are sensible. Others call for animal dung, including the dung of an antelope for an eye remedy and lizard dung for another. If you put dung into a wound or an eye, you are putting germs into it.

Then you open the books of Moses.

## Washing in Running Water

The Law of Moses tells people who have had certain kinds of discharge from the body, or who have touched a dead body, to wash their clothes and bathe, and in some cases to bathe in running water.

> *'And when the one with the discharge becomes clean from his discharge, then he shall count for himself seven days for his cleansing, and he shall wash his garments and bathe his flesh in living water, and he shall be clean.* (Leviticus 15:13)

The Hebrew phrase, word for word, is “living water,” meaning water that flows from a spring or a stream, not water that sits in a bowl. Water that has been used to wash something unclean carries the uncleanness with it. Running water carries it away.

The same chapter says that a clay pot touched by a person with a discharge must be broken, and a wooden one rinsed in water (Leviticus 15:12). Clay is porous. You can’t truly clean it.

## Touching the Dead

> *The one who touches the dead, of any soul of mankind, and he shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself from sin with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean; and if he does not purify himself from sin on the third day and on the seventh day, he shall not be clean.* (Numbers 19:11-12)

Anyone who touched a dead body was unclean for seven days and had to wash on the third and seventh days. Their clothes had to be washed too, and the tent where the person died was unclean, along with every open container in it (Numbers 19:14-15).

That one rule, followed faithfully, would have stopped the tragedy in that Vienna delivery room.

## Ignaz Semmelweis

In the 1840s, the Vienna General Hospital had two maternity clinics. The first clinic was staffed by doctors and medical students. The second was staffed by midwives. Women were terrified of the first clinic, because mothers there were dying of a disease called childbed fever (puerperal fever) at a far higher rate. Some women gave birth in the street rather than be admitted.

A young Hungarian doctor named Ignaz Semmelweis set out to find out why. In 1847, a colleague of his cut his finger during an autopsy and died of an illness just like childbed fever. Semmelweis realized what was happening. The doctors and students were carrying something from the corpses in the autopsy room to the mothers. The midwives didn’t do autopsies.

In May 1847, he ordered everyone in the first clinic to wash their hands in a solution of chlorinated lime before examining patients. The death rate fell from about 18 percent in April to about 2 percent in June and around 1 percent in July.

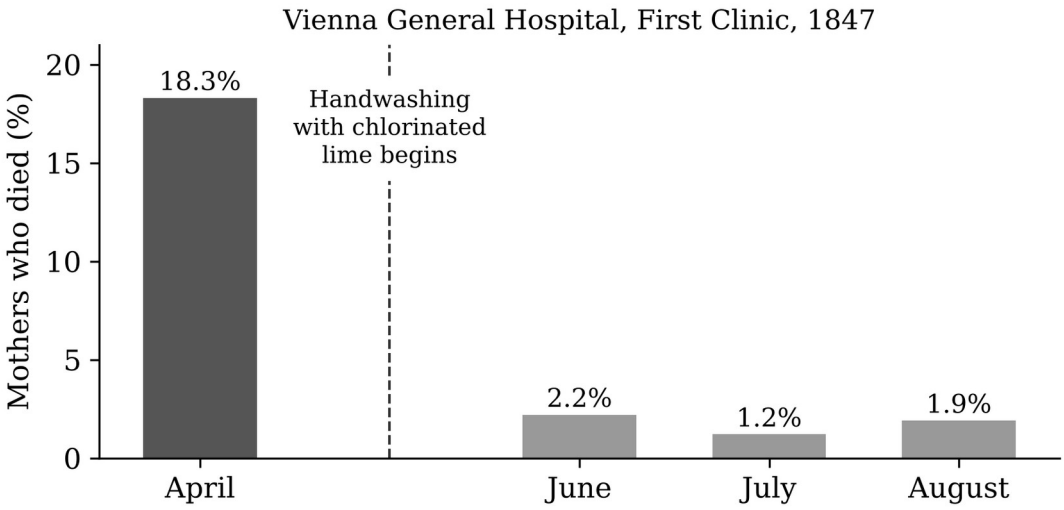



*Figure 3. Deaths from childbed fever before and after handwashing (Semmelweis, 1847)*

You would think the medical world would have thanked him. Instead, most of his fellow doctors rejected his ideas. Some were offended at the suggestion that their hands were dirty. Semmelweis lost his job in Vienna, and he died in 1865 in an asylum, broken and mocked. His ideas were proven right only after Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch showed in the 1860s and 1870s that germs cause disease, and Joseph Lister began using carbolic acid to clean wounds and instruments in surgery in 1867.

Moses had told Israel, more than three thousand years earlier, to wash after touching the dead.

**Evidence check:** *Confirmed* for the Semmelweis history. See my honest note at the end of this chapter about what the Law of Moses was and wasn't trying to teach.

## Quarantine

The Bible's laws on skin disease are found in Leviticus 13 and 14. A priest examined the person. If the case was unclear, the person was shut away for seven days and examined again, sometimes for another seven days (Leviticus 13:4-5). If the disease was confirmed, the person lived outside the camp.

> *And the leper in whom the plague **is**, his garments shall be torn, and **the hair of** his head shall be let loose, and he shall cover over **his** mustache, and he shall call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' All the days that the plague **is** in him he shall be unclean; he **is** unclean; he shall dwell alone; his dwelling **shall be** outside the camp.* (Leviticus 13:45-46)

The person had to tear their clothes, cover the lower part of their face, and call out "Unclean! Unclean!" so that people would keep their distance. If that sounds harsh, it is also exactly what public health experts call isolation, and the face covering is not far from a mask. The seven-day waiting period followed by a second exam is what we call quarantine.

The word *quarantine* comes from the Italian *quaranta giorni*, "forty days." During the plague years of the 1300s, the city of Ragusa (today Dubrovnik, Croatia) passed a law in 1377 requiring ships and travelers from plague areas to wait thirty days in isolation before entering the city. Venice and other cities later

made it forty. Europe was learning, in the hardest way possible, what the Law of Moses had laid out long before.

A word of caution. The Hebrew word often translated "leprosy" (*tsara'at*) covers a range of skin conditions, and even mold on clothing and walls. It is not the same thing as Hansen's disease, which is what doctors call leprosy today. So I don't claim Moses was describing a particular germ. The point is the method: examine, separate, wait, examine again.

## Mold in the House

Leviticus 14 even covers what to do when a house has spots of green or red on the walls, which sounds a lot like mold. The priest was to empty the house, shut it for seven days, and then have the affected stones removed and the walls scraped.

> *And he shall have the house scraped inside all around, and they shall pour out the dust that they have scraped off to the outside of the city, into an unclean place. And they shall take other stones and bring **them** in place of the stones, and he shall take other dust and plaster the house.* (Leviticus 14:41-42)

If the spots came back, the house was torn down (Leviticus 14:43-45). Any homeowner who has fought black mold behind drywall will understand. You scrape it, replace it, and if it keeps coming back, you tear it out.

## Fire and Water for Metal

After a battle with the Midianites, Israel was told to purify the spoils.

> *Only the gold and the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead, every thing that goes into the fire, you shall make pass through the fire, and it will be clean; nevertheless it shall be purified with the water of impurity. And all that does not go into the fire, you shall make pass through the water.* (Numbers 31:22-23)

Anything that could take fire was passed through fire, and everything else was washed in water. Heat kills germs. That is exactly how a hospital autoclave works today, using high-pressure steam.

## A Latrine Outside the Camp

> *And you shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out there, outside. And you shall have a peg among your equipment, and it shall be, when you sit down outside, that you shall dig with it, and turn back and cover your excrement. For the LORD your God walks about in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to give your enemies before you; and your camp shall be holy, and He shall not see among you the nakedness of a thing and turn away from after you.* (Deuteronomy 23:12-14)

Every soldier carried a digging tool. He went outside the camp and buried his waste. Again, this sounds obvious to us. It wasn't obvious to the world until very recently.

In 1854, London was struck by cholera. A doctor named John Snow mapped the deaths in the Soho neighborhood and showed that they clustered around one public water pump on Broad Street, which turned out to be contaminated by a nearby cesspit. Cities across Europe and America didn't build modern sewer systems until the later 1800s. Even today, the World Health Organization lists diarrheal disease, mostly spread by human waste in water, as one of the leading causes of death for young children worldwide.

In war, disease often killed more soldiers than enemy weapons. In the American Civil War, about two thirds of the soldiers who died (long counted at around 620,000, and some newer estimates are higher) are generally estimated to have died of disease rather than battle.

Israel's camp rule kept waste away from the people, buried, and outside the place where they lived and ate.

## An Honest Word About Purpose

I want to be careful here, because Christian writers have sometimes oversold this subject. The Law of Moses does not say, "Wash because of germs." It says, "Be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44), and "The LORD your God walks about in the midst of your camp" (Deuteronomy 23:14). The purpose of these laws was holiness: teaching Israel that God is pure and that His people must be set apart for Him. Many of the purity laws have no obvious health purpose at all.

So I don't claim that Moses had a microscope, or that every law is a health law. Here is what I do claim. The God who gave these laws knew what Moses did not. When He told His people how to live, the rules He gave protected them from dangers no one would understand for three thousand years. That is exactly what you would expect if the laws came from the God who made the human body, and it is not what you would expect from a tribe that simply copied the medicine of Egypt.

God promised, "all the sickness which I put on Egypt I will not put on you; for I ***am*** the LORD who heals you" (Exodus 15:26). Part of the way He kept that promise was through these very laws.

## Study Questions

1. What did doctors believe caused disease before germ theory?
2. Compare the Ebers Papyrus with the Law of Moses. What stands out?
3. How would Numbers 19:11-12 have prevented the deaths Semmelweis saw?
4. How do the laws in Leviticus 13 look like modern isolation and quarantine?
5. Why is it important to say that the purpose of these laws was holiness, not just health?

# Chapter 20: Food, Blood, Rest, and the Body

> *For the life of the flesh **is** in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it **is** the blood **that** makes atonement by the life.*
>
> Leviticus 17:11 (SLB)

The last chapter looked at washing, quarantine, and waste. This chapter looks at a few other places where the Bible touches on the human body: the food laws, blood, circumcision, and rest. Some of these claims hold up well. One of them, which you may have heard in church, does not hold up, and I'll show you why.

## Leftovers and Roadkill

Two food rules in the Law of Moses are easy to skip, but they make good sense to anyone who has ever had food poisoning.

First, meat from a peace offering had to be eaten within two days. Anything left on the third day was burned.

> *And if the sacrifice of his offering **is** a vow or a freewill offering, on the day he brings near his sacrifice it shall be eaten; and on the next day the remainder of it also shall be eaten. And the remainder of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burned with fire. And if any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings is eaten at all on the third day, it shall not be accepted; for the one who brings it near it shall not be reckoned to him; it shall be a foul thing, and the soul who eats of it shall bear its iniquity.* (Leviticus 7:16-18)

In a hot country with no refrigerators, meat goes bad fast. Burning it on the third day kept people from eating spoiled meat.

Second, Israelites were not to eat an animal that had died on its own or had been torn by wild animals (Deuteronomy 14:21; Leviticus 17:15). You don't know what killed it, or how long it has been lying there.

## The Clean and Unclean Animals

Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 list the animals Israel could and could not eat. Pigs, shellfish, birds of prey, and many others were off the menu.

People have long suggested health reasons for these laws. Pigs can carry a parasite called *Trichinella*, which causes the disease trichinosis when undercooked pork is eaten. Shellfish such as clams, oysters, and mussels filter large amounts of water and can concentrate toxins, which is why health departments close shellfish beds after certain algae blooms. Scavengers and birds of prey eat dead things.

I think those observations are real and interesting. But again, I want to be fair. The Bible itself gives the reason for these laws, and it isn't health.

> *For you **are** a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be for Him a people of treasured possession out of all the peoples who **are** on the face of the ground.* (Deuteronomy 14:2)

The food laws marked Israel as a separate people. And in the New Testament, Jesus taught that what goes into a person's stomach does not make him unclean (Mark 7:18-19), Paul wrote that nothing is unclean in itself (Romans 14:14), and Peter learned in a vision that God was opening the door to the Gentiles (Acts 10:9-16). Christians are free to eat pork, and a ham sandwich is not a sin. So I wouldn't build a case for the Bible on the food laws alone. What I would say is that the God who gave them knew what He was doing, and the laws did Israel no harm.

**Evidence check:** *Strong* that some food laws had real health benefits. But that was not their stated purpose.

## The Life Is in the Blood

> *For the life of the flesh **is** in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it **is** the blood **that** makes atonement by the life.* (Leviticus 17:11)

For thousands of years, one of the most common treatments in Western medicine was bloodletting, the practice of draining blood to "balance" the body's humors. Doctors cut veins or used leeches, sometimes taking large amounts of blood from patients who were already weak.

In December 1799, George Washington woke up with a severe throat infection. Over about twelve hours his doctors drained his blood several times, by most accounts around five pints in all, which is a large share of the blood in a grown man's body. He died that night. We can't know if he would have survived without the bleeding, but it certainly didn't help him.

It wasn't until the 1800s that careful studies showed bloodletting did more harm than good for most illnesses, and the practice faded. Today, we understand that blood carries oxygen and nutrients to every cell in the body, fights infection, and carries away waste. Without it, nothing in the body lives. Leviticus said it in nine words: "the life of the flesh ***is*** in the blood."

Leviticus wasn't written as a medical textbook. It was written to teach that blood, as the carrier of life, is what makes atonement for sin, pointing ahead to the blood of Christ (Hebrews 9:22). But the statement it makes is plain and true, and the medicine of the next three thousand years often acted as if it were false.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.*

## The Eighth Day

> *And a son of eight days shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, one born of **the** house and one bought with silver from any foreigner who **is** not of your seed.* (Genesis 17:12)

You may have heard a story about this verse. It goes like this: a newborn's blood doesn't clot well in the first days of life because the baby is low in vitamin K, and a clotting protein called prothrombin reaches

its highest level of the baby's whole life on the eighth day. So God picked the one day when circumcision was safest.

A lot of us have heard that story, and I wanted it to be true. But when you check it, it doesn't hold up. The claim was made popular in a 1963 book called *None of These Diseases*, by Dr. S. I. McMillen. Current medical research doesn't show a special peak on day eight. What it does show is that newborns are at the highest risk of a bleeding problem called vitamin K deficiency bleeding during roughly the first week of life, and that the risk drops after that. That is why hospitals today give newborns a vitamin K shot at birth.

So here is what we can honestly say. Waiting until the eighth day avoided the riskiest days for bleeding. That fits medical knowledge well. But the claim that prothrombin climbs above normal adult levels on day eight is not supported, and I would stop using it.

**Evidence check:** *Not supported* for the day-eight peak. *Consistent* with avoiding the first week's bleeding risk.

## A Day of Rest

> *Six days you shall labor and do all your work, and the seventh day **is** a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, and your livestock, and your sojourner who **is** within your gates.* (Exodus 20:9-10)

Most ancient peoples had festival days, but a regular weekly day off for everyone, including servants, foreigners, and even work animals, was unusual. It was a gift, and it was a protection for the weakest people in society. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for the sake of man, not man for the sake of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

In 1793, during the French Revolution, the new government replaced the seven-day week with a ten-day week, with one day of rest in ten. It was unpopular and was abolished in 1806. In 1929 the Soviet Union tried a rotating five-day work week with staggered days off, and abandoned it within a few years. Neither experiment lasted.

Modern research has a great deal to say about burnout, sleep, and the cost of overwork. I won't claim a study proves the seventh day in particular. But the principle that people need regular rest from work, built into the calendar, is one the Bible gave us, and the world is still learning how wise it is.

## A Cheerful Heart

> *A glad heart makes healing good, and a stricken spirit dries up **the** bone.* (Proverbs 17:22)

Doctors today talk about the link between stress, mood, and physical health. Long-term stress and depression are tied to heart disease and a weaker immune system, and patients with strong social support tend to recover better. Proverbs said it in one line: a glad heart is good medicine, and a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

## Study Questions

1. Why do the rules in Leviticus 7:16-18 and Deuteronomy 14:21 make sense in a world without refrigerators?
2. What reason does the Bible itself give for the food laws? Why does that matter?
3. Read Leviticus 17:11. How did the practice of bloodletting go against what this verse says?
4. What is wrong with the popular story about vitamin K and the eighth day? What can we honestly say instead?
5. Why do you think the French and Soviet attempts to change the week failed?

# Chapter 21: The Heavens and the Earth

> *The heavens are recounting the glory of God, and the expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*
>
> Psalm 19:1 (SLB)

The Bible is not a science book. It was written to tell us who God is, what has gone wrong with us, and what He has done about it. It describes the world the way people see it, the same way a weather report today still says "sunrise at 6:42" even though we all know the earth turns and the sun doesn't rise.

But here and there, the Bible says things about the universe that turned out to fit what science discovered much later. Other claims you may have heard go further than the text does. In this chapter I'll show you both.

## The Universe Had a Beginning

> *In **the** beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* (Genesis 1:1)

For most of the history of science, the leading view was that the universe had always existed. The Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that the cosmos was eternal. Even in the early 1900s, many scientists, including Albert Einstein at first, assumed the universe as a whole was unchanging and had no beginning.

Then the evidence began to point the other way.

- In 1927, Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian physicist who was also a Catholic priest, proposed that the universe is expanding. In 1931 he went a step further and proposed that it must have begun from an extremely hot, dense state, which he called the "primeval atom."
- In 1929, American astronomer Edwin Hubble published observations showing that distant galaxies are moving away from us, and the farther away they are, the faster they recede. The universe is expanding.
- In 1948, three British scientists, Hermann Bondi, Thomas Gold, and Fred Hoyle, offered a rival idea, the "steady state" theory, in which the universe expands forever but has no beginning, because new matter is constantly created. Hoyle, who disliked the idea of a beginning, coined the phrase "Big Bang" on a BBC radio broadcast in 1949, partly to poke fun at it.
- In 1965, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson of Bell Labs in New Jersey published their discovery of a faint microwave glow coming from every direction in the sky. It was the leftover heat from the early universe, which the Big Bang theory had predicted. They won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1978, and the steady state theory lost most of its support.

Today, nearly all scientists accept that the universe had a beginning, roughly 13.8 billion years ago by the standard measurements. Christians differ on the age of the universe (Chapter 22). But all Christians agree on the main point, and science has come around to it: the universe has not always been here. It began.

Robert Jastrow, an astronomer who founded NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and who described himself as an agnostic, put it memorably in his 1978 book *God and the Astronomers*. He wrote that for the scientist who has lived by faith in the power of reason, "the story ends like a bad dream. He

has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."

**Evidence check:** *Strong.* The universe had a beginning, as Genesis 1:1 says.

## Stars Beyond Counting

God told Abraham, "Please look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them" (Genesis 15:5). Jeremiah wrote that "the host of the heavens cannot be counted" (Jeremiah 33:22).

On a clear, dark night, a person with good eyesight can see a few thousand stars. The ancient Greek astronomer Hipparchus made a star catalog in the 100s B.C. with about 850 stars. The astronomer Ptolemy, around A.D. 150, listed 1,022. For centuries, people assumed the stars could be counted.

In 1610, Galileo turned a telescope on the Milky Way and found it was made of countless stars too faint to see with the naked eye. Today, astronomers estimate that our galaxy alone holds a few hundred billion stars, and that there are hundreds of billions of galaxies, or more, in the part of the universe we can observe. No one will ever count them all.

**Evidence check:** *Strong.*

## The Earth Hangs on Nothing

> *He stretches out the north over formlessness; He hangs the earth on nothing.* (Job 26:7)

Many ancient peoples pictured the earth resting on something: on pillars, on a great ocean, or on the back of a giant creature or a god. Job, one of the oldest books in the Bible, says simply that God "hangs the earth on nothing." That is a striking picture of what we now know: the earth floats in space, held in its orbit by gravity.

To be fair, the Bible also uses poetic language about the "pillars of the earth" (1 Samuel 2:8; Job 9:6) and its "foundations" (Psalm 104:5), the same way we talk about a solid, unshakable thing. Poetry uses pictures. So I won't say Job had a scientific theory of gravity. But the image he uses fits the real world remarkably well.

**Evidence check:** *Consistent.*

## The Circle of the Earth

You may have heard that Isaiah 40:22 proves the Bible taught that the earth is round, long before anyone else knew it.

> ***It is*** *the One who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants* ***are*** *like grasshoppers;*
> *the One who stretched out the heavens like the curtain, and He spread them out like the tent to dwell* ***in*** (Isaiah 40:22)

I'd be careful with that one. The Hebrew word *chug* means "circle" or "circuit," and it can describe a flat disk or the circle of the horizon as well as a sphere. Hebrew had another word for a ball (*dur*, used in

Isaiah 22:18), and Isaiah didn't use it here. Also, the Greeks had worked out that the earth was a sphere by the 300s B.C., and Eratosthenes even estimated its size around 240 B.C. And the common idea that people in the Middle Ages thought the earth was flat is mostly a myth; educated Europeans knew it was round.

So I'd put it this way. Isaiah's picture of God sitting enthroned above the circle of the earth is true and beautiful, and it fits a round earth. But it is not proof that Isaiah was teaching the shape of the planet.

**Evidence check:** *Consistent*, but often overstated.

## The Water Cycle

> *All the rivers go to the sea, and the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers go, there they return to go.* (Ecclesiastes 1:7)
>
> *For He draws up drops of water; they distill rain into its mist, which the skies pour down; they drip on mankind abundantly.* (Job 36:27-28)
>
> *who builds His stairs in the heavens, and has founded His vault on the earth; who calls to the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the face of the earth: the LORD **is** His name.*
> (Amos 9:6)

Put these verses together, and you have the water cycle: water flows from rivers to the sea, rises as vapor, forms clouds, and falls as rain on the land. Ecclesiastes 1:6 even describes the wind moving in great circuits.

Some ancient Greek thinkers worked out parts of the water cycle too, so the Bible was not alone in noticing this. But it is accurate, and it doesn't include the strange ideas some ancient writers had, such as rivers being fed by a vast underground ocean.

**Evidence check:** *Consistent.*

## Springs of the Sea and Paths of the Seas

God asked Job, "Have you gone to the springs of the sea, and have you walked about in the recesses of the deep?" (Job 38:16). For most of history, no one had any idea what lay at the bottom of the ocean. In 1977, scientists in the research submarine *Alvin* discovered hot springs, called hydrothermal vents, on the floor of the Pacific near the Galapagos Islands, surrounded by communities of animals no one had ever seen. Scientists have also found that fresh groundwater seeps up into the sea from the seafloor along many coastlines.

Psalm 8:8 speaks of "whatever passes through the paths of the seas." There is a popular story that the American naval officer Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-1873), sometimes called the father of modern oceanography, was inspired by this verse to chart the ocean currents. Maury did chart winds and currents, and his book *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (1855) helped ships cut weeks off their voyages. He was a devout Christian who wrote about the Bible and nature. But the story of Psalm 8 sparking his work is usually told without a source, so I treat it as a story, not a fact.

**Evidence check:** *Consistent.*

## What This Adds Up To

None of these verses were written to teach science, and I don't want to make them do more than they do. What strikes me is this. The Bible was written in a world full of myths about how the universe began: gods fighting gods, a world made from the body of a slain monster, a cosmos that had always existed. Genesis says none of that. It says one God created everything from nothing, by His word. Hebrews puts it this way: "the things which are seen have not come into being out of things that are visible" (Hebrews 11:3). That fits what science has found better than any ancient myth does.

## Study Questions

1. Why is it important to remember that the Bible describes the world the way people see it?
2. How did the discovery of the expanding universe and the cosmic microwave background change science's view of the beginning?
3. Read Job 26:7. Why is this verse striking, and why should we also be careful not to overstate it?
4. What is the honest way to talk about Isaiah 40:22?
5. Read Romans 1:20. What does creation show us about God?

# Chapter 22: Where Christians Still Disagree About Science

> *Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell **Me**, if you know understanding.*
>
> Job 38:4 (SLB)

This book would not be honest if I only showed you the places where science and the Bible fit neatly together. There are questions where Bible-believing Christians disagree with each other, and where some scientists disagree with all of them. I want to lay those out fairly, so that you know what the questions are and can study them for yourself.

## Two Books, One Author

Christians have long said that God speaks through two books: the book of Scripture and the book of nature. Psalm 19 begins with the heavens declaring God's glory and then turns to the law of the LORD, which is perfect. Paul says creation makes God's power and divine nature "clearly seen" (Romans 1:20).

If God wrote both books, they can't truly contradict each other. When they seem to, one of three things is going on. We may be misreading the Bible. We may be misreading nature. Or we may not have all the facts yet. Humility is the right posture on both sides.

## The Galileo Lesson

In 1633, the Catholic Church in Rome forced the astronomer Galileo Galilei to take back his teaching that the earth moves around the sun. Church leaders believed verses like Psalm 104:5 ("He founded the earth on its foundations; it will not be shaken") taught that the earth stood still.

The Bible wasn't wrong. The church's reading of the Bible was. Psalm 104 is poetry about the stability of God's creation, not a statement about orbits. The lesson for us is not that science always wins. Science has been wrong many times too, as we saw with bloodletting and the eternal universe. The lesson is that we should be careful not to tie the Bible to an interpretation it doesn't require.

## How Old Is the Earth?

This is the biggest question on which Christians differ. Here are the main views, each held by serious believers who accept the Bible as God's Word.

- **Young earth.** The days of Genesis 1 are ordinary 24-hour days, and the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 give a fairly complete timeline, so the earth is roughly six to ten thousand years old. Holders of this view argue that the scientific dating methods rest on assumptions that may not hold, and that the global flood of Noah's day explains much of the rock record. Organizations such as Answers in Genesis and the Institute for Creation Research hold this view.
- **Old earth, day-age.** The Hebrew word for "day," *yom*, can mean a long period of time (as in "the day of the LORD"), so the six days of creation may be long ages. This view accepts the scientific age of the

universe, about 13.8 billion years, and the earth, about 4.5 billion years. Reasons to Believe, founded by astronomer Hugh Ross, holds this view.

- **Framework or literary view.** Genesis 1 is arranged as a carefully structured account, with days one to three forming realms and days four to six filling them, to teach who made the world and why, not how long it took.
- **Gap view.** An older view, held by some in the 1800s and 1900s, places a long gap of time between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.

Here is where I stand, the same as in my Genesis study. I believe the days of Genesis 1 were ordinary days. Each one has a number and an evening and a morning, and when God gave Israel the Sabbath, He pointed back to that week (Exodus 20:11). But the Bible gives no date for creation, and I won't put a number on the age of the earth. I am not going to settle this question in one chapter, and I won't pretend all Christians agree. What every one of these views shares is far more important than where they differ: God created the heavens and the earth, He did it on purpose, He made man and woman in His image, and the world is good and belongs to Him.

## What About Evolution?

Christians also differ over evolution. Some reject it entirely as a theory of how life began and diversified. Some accept that living things change and adapt over time, which no one disputes, while rejecting the idea that all life came from a common ancestor by unguided natural processes. Others accept common descent but insist that God guided it and that Adam and Eve were real people.

Here's where I come down on what the Bible requires. The Bible teaches that God is the Creator of all life (Genesis 1), that humanity is made in His image (Genesis 1:27), that Adam was a real man through whom sin entered the world (Romans 5:12), and that Jesus is the "last Adam" who came to undo what the first Adam did (1 Corinthians 15:45). Any view that denies those things departs from Scripture. Within those boundaries, Christians have room to study and disagree charitably.

## Noah's Flood

Christians also debate whether the flood covered the whole globe or a large region. I covered that question, the Babylonian flood stories, and the search for Noah's ark in Chapter 5.

## Study Questions

1. What does it mean that God speaks through two "books"? Why can't they truly contradict each other?
2. What lesson can Christians learn from the Galileo affair?
3. What are the main Christian views of the age of the earth? What do they all agree on?
4. Read Romans 5:12 and 1 Corinthians 15:45. Why does the Bible treat Adam as a real person?
5. How should Christians talk about questions where believers disagree?

# Part Six: New Finds and Honest Questions

# Chapter 23: What the Ground Gave Up: Finds From 2020 to 2026

> *And answering, He said to them, "I say to you that if these should be silent, the stones will cry out."*
>
> Luke 19:40 (SLB)

Archaeology is not a closed book. Every year, digs in Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, and Greece turn up new material, and labs find new ways to read old finds. In this chapter, I've gathered the most important discoveries related to the Bible that were announced or published from 2020 through the fall of 2026, when this book was finished. Some I've already described in earlier chapters. Others are new here.

Remember the rule from Chapter 1. A find announced this year may be argued over for decades. I give you each one with its evidence check, and many of them are still being studied.

Writing the Fact Check Series taught me never to overstate what one piece of evidence proves. Being honest about what a find does and does not show earns more trust than hype. Describing evidence plainly lets the facts carry their own weight.

## The Text of the Bible

- **2021: Greek Minor Prophets fragments.** The Israel Antiquities Authority announced new fragments of a Greek scroll of the Twelve Prophets, including parts of Zechariah and Nahum, from the Cave of Horror in the Judean Desert. They were the first new biblical scroll fragments found in an excavation in about sixty years. (*Confirmed.*)
- **2023: A hidden Syriac Gospel.** Grigory Kessel read part of a very old Syriac translation of Matthew hidden under later writing in a Vatican manuscript. (*Confirmed* as a find. The exact date of the translation is debated.)
- **2025: Dead Sea Scrolls dated by radiocarbon and computer.** The University of Groningen team's "Enoch" study suggested many scrolls are older than once thought, including a copy of Daniel from about 230 to 160 B.C. (*Strong* for the radiocarbon dates. *Debated* for the computer estimates.)
- **2026: Lost pages of Codex H.** The University of Glasgow announced that multispectral imaging recovered 42 lost pages of a sixth-century copy of Paul's letters. (*Confirmed* as reported.)

## The Old Testament Era

- **2023: The Gezer gate dated.** Radiocarbon dates placed Gezer's six-chambered gate in the early 900s B.C., the time of Solomon (1 Kings 9:15). (*Strong.*)
- **2023: "House of David" on the Mesha Stele.** New images supported reading the phrase on the Moabite Stone. (*Debated.*)
- **2023: Both destructions of Jerusalem on Mount Zion.** The Babylonian burn layer (586 B.C.) and the Roman destruction (A.D. 70) were found a few meters apart. (*Confirmed.*)

- **2024: A radiocarbon timeline for Jerusalem.** More than one hundred dates showed Jerusalem was lived in from the 1100s B.C. and pointed to building work in the days of Uzziah after a great earthquake (Amos 1:1; 2 Chronicles 26:9). (*Strong.*)
- **2024: Royal storehouse and jar handles.** About 180 stamped jar handles at Mordot Arnona, south of Jerusalem, many stamped "belonging to the king," from the time of Hezekiah and the Assyrian crisis. (*Confirmed.*)
- **2024: A Phoenician pendant in Jerusalem.** The earliest gold jewelry found in Jerusalem, dated to the 900s B.C., in a Phoenician style that fits Solomon's ties to Tyre. (*Strong.*)
- **2024: Babylon's Ishtar Gate dated.** A study of the magnetic signal locked in the gate's fired bricks dated it to about 583 B.C., give or take 22 years, in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. (*Strong.*)
- **2024: A First Temple-era seal.** A black stone seal found near the Temple Mount's southern wall reads "Belonging to Yehoezer son of Hoshayahu," Hebrew names that also appear in the Bible, though not necessarily for these men. (*Confirmed* as a find.)
- **2025: Pharaoh Necho's army at Megiddo?** Egyptian and Greek pottery from Megiddo was linked to the Egyptian army and its Greek mercenaries at the time King Josiah died there in 609 B.C. (2 Kings 23:29). (*Strong* for the pottery. *Debated* for the link.)
- **2025: The Siloam dam.** Radiocarbon dated the great dam at the Pool of Siloam to about 800 B.C., in the time of King Joash. (*Strong.*)
- **2025: An Assyrian letter in Jerusalem.** A tiny cuneiform fragment mentioning a late payment, from the time of Assyrian control of Judah. (*Strong.*)
- **2025: A Moabite inscription at Jericho.** The Italian expedition reported a pottery fragment with Moabite writing from about 960 to 840 B.C., suggesting Moab controlled Jericho for a time, which may fit Judges 3:12-13. (*Debated*, reported in an interim report.)
- **2025: A bulla naming Asayahu.** From the Temple Mount Sifting Project. (*Debated* whether it is the official of 2 Kings 22:12.)
- **2026: Hidden standing stone at Tel Eton.** Avraham Faust of Bar-Ilan University reported a standing stone deliberately covered by a platform, which he suggested may reflect a reform like Hezekiah's removal of the sacred pillars (2 Kings 18:4). (*Debated.*)
- **2026: Burned beams of 586 B.C.** Charred wooden beams from the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, found in the Givati Parking Lot excavation. (*Confirmed* as reported. Tests underway.)
- **2026: Shiloh, season eight.** More walls of a monumental building and storage jars with burned food. (*Strong* for the finds. Interpretations *debated*.)
- **2026: Hittite treaty fragment.** A new piece of the Egyptian-Hittite peace treaty, found at Hattusa. (*Confirmed* as reported.)

## The New Testament Era

- **2023: An inkwell at el-Araj.** Found in a first-century fisherman's house at a site that may be Bethsaida, suggesting that fishermen could read and write. (*Strong* for the find. *Debated* for Bethsaida.)
- **2023: An early papyrus of Jesus' sayings.** P.Oxy. 5575, late second or early third century, with sayings that match Matthew 6 and Luke 12. (*Confirmed.*)
- **2024: The Frankfurt silver inscription.** A third-century Christian amulet from Germany quoting Philippians 2:10-11, read by CT scan. (*Confirmed.*)
- **2025: A garden under the Holy Sepulchre.** Olive and grape remains under the church floor, fitting John 19:41. (*Strong* for the garden. *Debated* whether this is the exact tomb.)

- **2025: Colossae excavated.** The first systematic dig at the city of Paul's letter to the Colossians. (*Confirmed* as reported.)
- **2025: Herod's palace built over a Hasmonean wall.** Near the Jaffa Gate, part of a massive wall from the century before Herod, taken apart before his palace was built, which may fit Josephus's account. (*Strong.*)

## What the Recent Finds Show

Two patterns stand out to me.

First, new scientific tools are giving old finds new voices. Radiocarbon dating with tree-ring corrections, magnetic dating of bricks, CT scans of rolled metal and charred scrolls, multispectral photography of reused pages, and computer analysis of handwriting are all producing evidence we didn't have a generation ago.

Second, those new tools have mostly pushed in one direction. The scrolls look older, not younger. Jerusalem in the time of David and Solomon looks more lived-in, not less. Building projects the Bible assigns to particular kings, like Uzziah and Joash, are showing up in the dating at the right time. That doesn't settle every debate, and I have marked the ones that are still open. But after two hundred years of digging, the ground keeps agreeing with the Book.

## Study Questions

1. Which of the finds in this chapter surprised you most? Why?
2. Why should Christians be patient with brand-new discoveries before using them as evidence?
3. How have new scientific tools changed Bible archaeology in recent years?
4. Read Luke 19:40. What do you think Jesus meant when He said the stones would cry out?
5. Which of these finds could you share with a skeptical friend, and how would you describe its strength honestly?

# Chapter 24: Hoaxes, Hype, and Honest Doubts

*Test all things; hold fast the good.*

1 Thessalonians 5:21 (SLB)

Every field that excites people attracts fakes, and Bible archaeology excites a lot of people. Some forgers want money. Some want fame. Some, I'm sorry to say, want to help the faith and think a little lie is worth it. It never is. When a fake is exposed, it hands skeptics a club to beat the church with, and it makes the real evidence harder to believe.

God doesn't need our help with forgeries. "Test all things; hold fast the good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Here are some lessons from recent history.

Writing the 18 books of the Fact Check Series trained me to go back to the original source before repeating anything I read online. Christians hurt our own credibility when we pass along rumors without testing them (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Testing every claim protects both the truth and our witness.

## The Museum of the Bible Fragments

When the Museum of the Bible opened in Washington, D.C., in 2017, it displayed several fragments said to be from the Dead Sea Scrolls, bought on the antiquities market after 2002. Scholars soon raised doubts. In 2020, the museum released the report of an independent investigation by an art-fraud team led by Colette Loll. All sixteen of its fragments were forgeries, written on ancient leather but in modern times.

To its credit, the museum made the report public. The lesson is the one from Chapter 1: an object without a known findspot, bought on the market, is weak evidence no matter how good it looks.

**Evidence check:** *Not supported.* These were forgeries.

## The Gospel of Jesus' Wife

In 2012, a respected Harvard professor, Karen King, announced a small papyrus fragment in Coptic in which Jesus says, "my wife." It made headlines around the world. In 2016, journalist Ariel Sabar traced the fragment to its owner and found a trail of fabrication. King herself said the evidence now pointed to forgery.

This one wasn't a Christian forgery. It was the opposite, a fake that seemed to undercut traditional belief. The same rule applies to both.

**Evidence check:** *Not supported.*

## The James Ossuary

In 2002, a limestone bone box surfaced with an Aramaic inscription: "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." It was hailed as the first physical evidence of Jesus. The Israel Antiquities Authority accused its

owner, a collector named Oded Golan, of forging part of the inscription. After a trial that lasted years, the judge acquitted him of forgery in 2012, saying the prosecution had not proved its case, but he also said the court could not declare the inscription authentic.

So where does that leave us? The box is ancient. Many experts think "James son of Joseph" is genuine. Experts still disagree about "brother of Jesus." Since the box came from the antiquities market, we will probably never know where it was found.

**Evidence check:** *Debated.* I would not rely on it.

## The "Jesus Family Tomb"

In 2007, a documentary claimed that a tomb found in 1980 in the Talpiot neighborhood of Jerusalem held the bones of Jesus and His family, because ossuaries in it had names like Yeshua son of Joseph, Mary, and Joseph. Nearly every archaeologist who studied the claim rejected it, including Amos Kloner, who had excavated the tomb. These were some of the most common Jewish names of the time. In Jerusalem in the first century, if you shouted "Joseph!" in a crowded street, a lot of heads would turn.

**Evidence check:** *Not supported.*

## Other Claims to Avoid

- **Noah's ark found.** Not supported so far. A new investigation at the Durupinar site in Turkey is waiting on lab results (Chapter 5).
- **Chariot wheels in the Red Sea.** Popular videos claim coral-covered chariot wheels lie on the floor of the Gulf of Aqaba. No such find has been published by any archaeologist, and none has been recovered and studied.
- **The Ark of the Covenant found.** Several people have claimed to find it, including the American adventurer Ron Wyatt in the 1980s. No claim has ever been verified, and Wyatt's other claims were rejected by archaeologists, including Christian ones.
- **Sodom destroyed by an airburst.** The 2021 paper was retracted in 2025 (Chapter 7).
- **The day-eight vitamin K peak.** Not supported by current medical evidence (Chapter 20).
- **Giant human skeletons.** Photos of huge skeletons circulate online. They are edited images, often from a photo contest. None are real finds.

## When Christians Overreach

Sometimes it isn't a forgery but an overstatement. A real find is described as proving more than it does. A news headline says "Archaeologists confirm Bible story," when the archaeologist said "this might fit."

I've tried to avoid that in this book, and I hope you'll notice that I've marked many things "debated" and some "not supported." Here's why that matters to me. If skeptics catch you overselling one find, they won't trust you on the next one. But if you are known for telling the truth, even when it costs you a good story, then when you say, "This one is solid," people will listen.

Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). His followers should be the most careful people in the room about what is true.

## Honest Doubts

And then there are the open questions, the places where the evidence is thin or seems to point a different way, and faithful scholars are still working: the date of the Exodus, the size of David's Jerusalem, the date of Jericho's destruction, the census of Quirinius. I've shown you all of these.

I don't think we should be afraid of hard questions. The record of the last two hundred years is that hard questions about the Bible have often been answered by later evidence. Not always, and not yet in every case. But often enough that I am content to wait, and to keep trusting the God who has been shown faithful so many times.

## Study Questions

1. Why do forgeries and hype hurt the case for the Bible?
2. What do the Museum of the Bible fragments and the Gospel of Jesus' Wife have in common?
3. Why are the names on the Talpiot ossuaries not strong evidence?
4. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:21. How can you test the claims you see online?
5. Why can Christians face hard questions without fear?

# Chapter 25: The Empty Tomb: The Claim Everything Rests On

> *For I delivered to you among **the** first **things** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some also have fallen asleep. After that He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. And last of all, as to the untimely birth, He appeared also to me.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (SLB)

Everything in this book so far has been about the Bible's setting: its kings, its cities, its copies, its laws. All of that matters. But the Christian faith does not stand or fall on whether we find another king's seal. It stands or falls on one claim: that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, rose bodily from the dead on the third day.

No shovel can dig that up. But history can examine it, and in this last chapter I want to show you how.

## The Oldest Christian Creed

Look again at the verses at the top of this chapter. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians around A.D. 55. But he says that what he is passing on is something he himself "received." The words he uses, "delivered" and "received," are the words Jewish teachers used for handing down a fixed teaching. And the passage has the feel of a memorized summary: died, buried, raised, appeared.

Most New Testament scholars, including many who don't believe the resurrection happened, think Paul received this summary within a few years of the crucifixion, likely when he visited Peter and James in Jerusalem about three years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18-19). That means the claim that Jesus rose and appeared to named witnesses goes back to the earliest days of the church, not to legends that grew up over generations.

## Facts Most Historians Accept

Scholars such as Gary Habermas, who has surveyed a very large body of academic writing on the resurrection, point out that a small set of facts is accepted by a wide range of historians, whatever they believe about God. Here they are in plain words.

1. Jesus died by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. We saw in Chapter 12 that Tacitus and Josephus confirm this.
2. Soon afterward, His disciples sincerely believed they had seen Him alive again, and they said so publicly in Jerusalem, the very city where He was executed.
3. Their lives were transformed. Men who ran away and hid at His arrest became bold preachers, and many of them suffered and died rather than take back what they said.

4. James, the brother of Jesus, who did not believe in Him during His ministry (John 7:5), became a leader of the church in Jerusalem and was later killed for his faith, as Josephus reports.
5. Saul of Tarsus, a persecutor of the church, became the apostle Paul after what he described as an appearance of the risen Jesus.

Many scholars would add a sixth fact: that the tomb was found empty.

## The Empty Tomb

Why do many historians think the tomb was empty?

First, the disciples preached the resurrection in Jerusalem, a short walk from the tomb. If the body had still been there, the authorities could have ended the movement by producing it.

Second, the earliest Jewish response to the Christian message did not say the tomb was full. It said the disciples stole the body.

> *Now while they were going, look, some of the guard, having gone into the city, reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. And having been gathered together with the elders, and having taken counsel, they gave many silver **coins** to the soldiers, saying, "Say that His disciples, having come by night, stole Him while we were sleeping. And if this is heard by the governor, we will persuade him and keep you free from trouble." And having taken the silver **coins**, they did as they were instructed. And this word was spread abroad among **the** Jews until the present **day**.* (Matthew 28:11-15)

You don't need to explain an empty tomb if the tomb isn't empty. That story, which Matthew says was still going around when he wrote, admits the key point.

Third, all four Gospels say that women were the first witnesses to the empty tomb. In that culture, a woman's testimony was not given much weight in court. If you were making up a story to convince people, you would not make women your main witnesses. The Gospel writers did it because that's what happened.

## What About Other Explanations?

People have suggested other answers over the years. Here are the main ones, briefly.

**The disciples stole the body.** Then they died for something they knew was a lie. People die for things they believe are true, but not for things they know they made up.

**Jesus didn't really die.** Roman soldiers were professional executioners. John says a soldier pierced His side and blood and water came out (John 19:34). And a half-dead man who had been flogged and crucified, staggering out of a tomb, would not have convinced anyone that He had conquered death.

**The disciples had visions or hallucinations.** Hallucinations are private experiences. They don't happen to groups of people at once, let alone to more than five hundred. And a vision wouldn't explain the empty tomb, or the conversion of skeptics like James and enemies like Paul.

**The story grew into a legend over time.** The creed in 1 Corinthians 15 goes back to within a few years of the events, far too soon for legend to replace the facts while eyewitnesses were alive.

Each of these explanations covers some of the facts. None of them covers all of them. The resurrection does.

## Where Evidence Ends and Faith Begins

I want to be honest with you one last time. Historical evidence can bring you to the edge. It can show that the Bible's setting is real, that its copies are reliable, that its writers knew what they were talking about, and that the resurrection is the best explanation of the facts. But evidence can't make you trust Jesus. That is a step every person has to take for themselves.

Thomas wanted evidence. Jesus gave it to him.

> *Then He says to Thomas, "Bring your finger here, and see My hands; and bring your hand, and put **it** into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"* (John 20:27-28)

Then Jesus said something for everyone who would come after Thomas: "Blessed ***are*** those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29). That includes you and me. We haven't seen His hands. But we have the testimony of those who did, written down, carefully preserved, and set in a world that the ground has confirmed over and over.

John tells us why he wrote his Gospel.

> *but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.* (John 20:31)

## Study Questions

1. Why is 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 such early evidence for the resurrection?
2. Which of the facts accepted by most historians do you find most convincing? Why?
3. Read Matthew 28:11-15. What does the guards' story admit?
4. Why would it be strange to invent a story with women as the first witnesses?
5. What is the difference between evidence and faith? How do they work together?

# A Closing Word: The Stones and the Savior

> *And having begun from Moses and from all the prophets, He was explaining to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.*
>
> Luke 24:27 (SLB)

On the afternoon of the first Easter, two of Jesus' followers were walking home to a village called Emmaus, heartbroken and confused. A stranger joined them on the road. It was Jesus, though they didn't recognize Him. And He did something that I love. He didn't just show them His hands. He took them through the Scriptures.

"And having begun from Moses and from all the prophets, He was explaining to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

That is where all the evidence in this book points. The kings in stone, the seals of Jeremiah's enemies, the scroll of Isaiah in a cave by the Dead Sea, the Pool of Siloam, the stone with Pilate's name: they are not the point. They are signposts. They tell us that the Bible is a true account of real people in real places, and that the God who acted in that history kept His promises. And all of it leads to Jesus.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ, I'd ask you to consider Him seriously. You don't need to solve every question in this book first. You need to turn from your sin and put your trust in Jesus, who died for you and rose again. "If you confess with your mouth Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him out of ***the*** dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). My book *The Road Home* walks through that step by step, and it is free on my website.

If you already belong to Christ, then let this evidence make you bold and humble at the same time. Bold, because your faith rests on solid ground. Humble, because the truth doesn't need our exaggerations. Be ready "for a defense to everyone who asks you an account concerning the hope in you, with gentleness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).

And keep watching. The ground will keep giving up its secrets, and I expect many more finds will line up with the Book. But one day soon, we won't need archaeology at all. "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command," Paul wrote, and the dead in Christ will rise, and those who are alive will be caught up together with them to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). On that day we will see Him face to face, and the evidence will be standing in front of us.

# Appendix A: A Timeline of Major Discoveries

This table lists the major finds in this book in the order they were discovered or first published, with the chapter where each is described.

| Year found or published | Discovery | What it relates to | Chapter |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1843 | Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad | Isaiah 20:1 | 10 |
| 1846 | Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III | Jehu, 2 Kings 9 and 10 | 10 |
| 1840s | Lachish reliefs at Nineveh | 2 Kings 18:13-14 | 10 |
| 1844-1859 | Codex Sinaiticus | The New Testament text | 4 |
| 1854 | Nabonidus cylinders at Ur | Belshazzar, Daniel 5 | 11 |
| 1861 | Kurkh Monolith | Ahab | 10 |
| 1868 | Mesha Stele (Moabite Stone) | 2 Kings 3:4-5 | 8 |
| 1869 | Temple of Artemis at Ephesus | Acts 19 | 17 |
| 1871 | Temple warning inscription | Acts 21:28-29; Ephesians 2:14 | 15 |
| 1872 | Flood tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh read | Genesis 6 to 9 | 5 |
| 1879 | Cyrus Cylinder | Ezra 1:1-4 | 11 |
| 1880 | Siloam Inscription in Hezekiah's Tunnel | 2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:30 | 10 |
| 1896 | Merneptah Stele | Israel in Canaan | 7 |
| 1890s-1900s | Elephantine Papyri | Sanballat, Nehemiah 2:19 | 11 |
| 1905 | Gallio inscription at Delphi published | Acts 18:12 | 17 |
| 1906 | Hittite capital at Hattusa | The Hittites | 6 |
| 1908-1910 and 1931-1935 | Samaria ivories | 1 Kings 22:39; Amos 6:4 | 9 |
| 1913 | Theodotus synagogue inscription | Synagogues in Jerusalem | 13 |
| 1922-1934 | Excavations at Ur | Genesis 11:31 | 6 |
| 1929 | Erastus inscription at Corinth | Romans 16:23 | 17 |
| 1935 | Lachish Letters | Jeremiah 34:7 | 11 |
| 1939 | Jehoiachin ration tablets published | 2 Kings 25:27-30 | 11 |
| 1947-1956 | Dead Sea Scrolls | The Old Testament text | 3 |
| 1956-1962 | Pool of Gibeon and Gibeon jar handles | 2 Samuel 2:13 | 9 |
| 1959 | Boat-shaped Durupinar formation spotted in an aerial photo | Genesis 8:4 | 5 |
| 1961 | Pilate Stone at Caesarea | Pontius Pilate | 16 |
| 1967 | Balaam inscription at Deir Alla | Numbers 22 to 24 | 9 |
| 1968 | Crucified heel bone of Yehohanan | Crucifixion and burial | 16 |
| 1975-1976 | Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions | 1 Kings 14:23 | 9 |
| 1979 | Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls | Numbers 6:24-26 | 3 |
| 1982 | Bulla of Gemariah son of Shaphan | Jeremiah 36:10 | 11 |
| 1986 | First-century Galilee boat | Gospels | 15 |
| 1990 | Caiaphas ossuary | Matthew 26:57 | 16 |

| Year found or published | Discovery | What it relates to | Chapter |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1993-1994 | Tel Dan Stele, “House of David” | King David | 8 |
| 2004 | Pool of Siloam | John 9:7 | 15 |
| 2005 and 2008 | Bullae of Jucal and Gedaliah | Jeremiah 38:1 | 11 |
| 2007 | Nebo-Sarsekim tablet identified | Jeremiah 39:3 | 11 |
| 2007-2013 | Khirbet Qeiyafa | The time of David | 8 |
| 2009 | Magdala synagogue; Nazareth house | Gospels | 15 |
| 2014 | Ark Tablet published (a round Babylonian ark) | Genesis 6:15 | 5 |
| 2015 | Hezekiah bulla read; En-Gedi scroll scanned | 2 Kings 18; Leviticus | 10, 3 |
| 2016 | Lachish gate shrine | 2 Kings 18:4 | 9 |
| 2018 | Pilate ring read | Pontius Pilate | 16 |
| 2021 | Greek Minor Prophets fragments | The Old Testament text | 3 |
| 2023 | Gezer gate dated; Syriac Matthew palimpsest | 1 Kings 9:15; Matthew | 8, 4 |
| 2024 | Jerusalem radiocarbon timeline; Frankfurt silver inscription | Uzziah; Philippians 2:10-11 | 10, 17 |
| 2025 | Siloam dam dated; Assyrian fragment; Holy Sepulchre garden | Joash; 2 Kings 18; John 19:41 | 10, 15 |
| 2026 | Codex H pages; burned beams of 586 B.C.; Tel Eton stone | Paul’s letters; 2 Kings 25:9; 2 Kings 18:4 | 4, 11, 9 |
| 2026 | Durupinar core drilling; wood samples sent to labs, results pending | Genesis 8:4 | 5 |

# Appendix B: Where to See the Evidence

Many of the objects in this book are on public display. If you ever travel, here are some places to see them with your own eyes. Displays change, so check with the museum before you go.

- **Israel Museum, Jerusalem:** the Dead Sea Scrolls (in the Shrine of the Book), the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls, the Tel Dan Stele, the Pilate Stone, the Caiaphas ossuary, and the Aleppo Codex.
- **City of David, Jerusalem:** Hezekiah's Tunnel, the Pool of Siloam, the Gihon Spring, and the stepped street to the Temple Mount.
- **British Museum, London:** the Black Obelisk, the Lachish reliefs, the Kurkh Monolith, the Cyrus Cylinder, the Taylor Prism, the Babylonian Chronicles, the Lachish Letters, the Politarch inscription, and Codex Sinaiticus (in the British Library next door).
- **Louvre, Paris:** the Mesha Stele.
- **Istanbul Archaeology Museums:** the Siloam Inscription and the temple warning inscription.
- **Vorderasiatisches Museum (Pergamon Museum complex), Berlin:** the reconstructed Ishtar Gate and the Jehoiachin ration tablets. (The whole Pergamon Museum has been closed for renovation since October 2023. Part of it reopens in June 2027, but the wing with the Ishtar Gate stays closed until the full reopening, planned for 2037.)
- **Egyptian Museum, Cairo:** the Merneptah Stele.
- **Yigal Allon Center, Kibbutz Ginosar, Israel:** the first-century Galilee boat.
- **Online:** The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library (deadseascrolls.org.il) and the Codex Sinaiticus Project (codexsinaiticus.org) let you look at the manuscripts from home.

# Appendix C: Words to Know

- **Bulla** (plural *bullae*): a small lump of clay pressed with a seal, used to close a document. Many bullae carry the names of officials.
- **Codex:** an ancient book with pages, as opposed to a scroll.
- **Cuneiform:** the wedge-shaped writing pressed into clay used in Mesopotamia, including by Assyria and Babylon.
- **Determinative:** a sign in Egyptian writing that shows what kind of word comes next, such as a city or a people.
- **Masoretes:** Jewish scribes who copied and preserved the Hebrew Bible from about A.D. 500 to 1000.
- **Minimalist and maximalist:** scholars who start from doubt or from trust in the Bible's history.
- **Ossuary:** a stone box used in Jesus' day to store the bones of the dead.
- **Ostracon** (plural *ostraca*): a piece of broken pottery with writing on it.
- **Paleography:** dating writing by the shape of its letters.
- **Palimpsest:** a manuscript page that was scraped and written over, with older writing underneath.
- **Papyrus:** a writing material made from the papyrus reed of Egypt.
- **Provenance:** the record of where an object was found and who has owned it.
- **Radiocarbon dating:** measuring how much carbon-14 is left in once-living material to tell when it died.
- **Septuagint:** the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament.
- **Sherd:** a broken piece of pottery.
- **Stele** (STEE-lee; plural *stelae*): an upright stone slab with an inscription, often a monument.
- **Stratum** (plural *strata*): one layer of a dig, from one period of time.
- **Syncline:** a fold in layers of rock that bends downward like a trough. Geologists use it to explain the boat shape at the Durupinar site.
- **Tell:** a mound made of the remains of cities built one on top of another.
- **Undesigned coincidence:** a small detail in one account that answers a question raised by another account, without either writer seeming to plan it.
- **Variant:** a difference in wording between manuscripts of the same text.

# Appendix D: Sources and Further Reading

These are the main sources behind each part of this book. News reports are listed where a find is too recent for a full scholarly report. Where a source is a news report, check for later scholarly publications.

## General

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## The Text (Chapters 3 and 4)

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## The Old Testament (Chapters 5 to 11)

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## Hoaxes (Chapter 24)


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# Appendix E: Scripture Index

This index lists the Bible passages quoted or cited in this book. The numbers after each passage are chapter numbers. “Intro” is Before You Begin, and “Back” is the closing word and the appendices.


- **Genesis:** 1:1 (21, 22); 1:27 (22); 6:15 (5, Back); 7:19 (5); 8:4 (5, Back); 9:11 (5); 11:31 (6, Back); 12:16 (6); 15:5 (21); 17:12 (20); 23:10 (6); 24:10 (6); 37:25 (6); 37:28 (6); 41:57 (5); 47:11 (6)
- **Exodus:** 1:11 (6, 7); 15:26 (19); 20:9-10 (20); 20:11 (22)
- **Leviticus:** 7:16-18 (20); 7:32-33 (7); 11:44 (19); 13:4-5 (19); 13:45-46 (19); 14:41-42 (19); 14:43-45 (19); 15:12 (13, 19); 15:13 (19); 17:11 (20); 17:15 (20)
- **Numbers:** 6:24-26 (3, Back); 19:11-12 (19); 19:14-15 (19); 22:5 (9); 31:22-23 (19)
- **Deuteronomy:** 14:2 (20); 14:21 (20); 23:12-14 (19); 23:14 (19)
- **Joshua:** 2:6 (7); 3:15 (7); 5:10 (7); 6:20 (7); 6:24 (7); 8:28 (1); 18:1 (7)
- **Judges:** 3:12-13 (23)
- **1 Samuel:** 2:8 (21); 17:2 (8)
- **2 Samuel:** 2:13 (9, Back); 5:7 (8); 8:14 (8)
- **1 Kings:** 6:1 (7); 9:15 (8, 23, Back); 12:28-29 (9); 14:23 (9, Back); 14:25-26 (8); 16:31 (9); 22:39 (9, Back)
- **2 Kings:** 3:4-5 (8, Back); 10:27 (9); 15:19 (10); 18:4 (9, 23, Back); 18:13 (10); 18:13-14 (10, Back); 19:35-36 (10); 19:37 (5); 20:20 (Back); 22:12 (11, 23); 23:29 (23); 24:10-17 (11); 25:9 (11, Back); 25:27-30 (Back)
- **2 Chronicles:** 26:9 (10, 23); 32:30 (10, Back)
- **Ezra:** 1:1-2 (11); 1:1-4 (Back)
- **Nehemiah:** 2:19 (11, Back); 12:22 (11)
- **Job:** 9:6 (21); 26:7 (21); 36:27-28 (21); 38:4 (22); 38:16 (21)
- **Psalm:** 8:8 (21); 19:1 (21); 104:5 (21, 22)
- **Proverbs:** 17:22 (20); 18:17 (1)
- **Ecclesiastes:** 1:6 (21); 1:7 (21)
- **Isaiah:** 6:1 (2); 20:1 (10, Back); 22:18 (21); 40:8 (3); 40:22 (21); 45:1 (11); 53:5 (3)
- **Jeremiah:** 29:5-7 (11); 33:22 (21); 34:7 (11, Back); 36:10 (11, Back); 38:1 (11, Back); 39:3 (11, Back); 44:17 (9); 52:31-34 (11)
- **Daniel:** 5:29 (11)
- **Amos:** 1:1 (2, 10, 23); 6:4 (9, Back); 9:6 (21)
- **Nahum:** 3:7 (9)
- **Zechariah:** 14:5 (2, 10)
- **Matthew:** 4:13 (15); 4:23 (15); 16:13 (13); 16:16 (13); 17:24-27 (13); 20:2 (13); 21:12 (13); 24:1-2 (15); 24:35 (3); 24:37 (5); 24:39 (5); 26:57 (16, Back); 27:2 (16); 27:57 (13); 27:59-60 (13); 28:11-15 (25)
- **Mark:** 1:29-31 (15); 2:27 (20); 3:21 (14); 6:14-29 (16); 6:39 (14); 7:3-4 (13); 7:18-19 (20); 12:15-17 (13); 12:42 (13); 15:1 (16); 15:21 (14); 15:42-46 (16); 16:9-20 (4)
- **Luke:** 1:1-2 (14); 1:1-4 (14); 1:2-3 (14); 1:3-4 (Intro); 2:2 (16); 3:1-2 (2); 3:2 (16); 9:10 (14); 13:32 (16); 19:40 (23); 23:6-12 (16); 24:27 (Back)
- **John:** 1:44 (15); 1:46 (15); 2:6 (13); 3:25 (13); 5:2 (15); 6:4 (14); 6:5 (14); 7:5 (14, 25); 7:53 (4); 9:7 (15, Back); 12:21 (14); 14:6 (24); 18:13 (16); 18:31-33 (4); 18:37-38 (4); 19:34 (25); 19:35 (14); 19:41 (23, Back); 19:41-42 (15); 20:27-28 (25); 20:29 (25); 20:31 (25); 21:24 (14)

- **Acts:** 1:22 (14); 2:41 (13); 4:6 (16); 4:20 (14); 6:9 (13); 10:9-16 (20); 13:7 (17); 13:12 (17); 16:14 (18); 17:6 (17); 17:11 (Intro); 18:2 (12); 18:12 (17, Back); 19:23-41 (17); 19:31 (17); 19:34 (17); 19:35 (17); 21:28-29 (15, Back); 26:26 (12); 28:7 (17)
- **Romans:** 1:20 (21, 22); 5:12 (22); 10:9 (Back); 14:14 (20); 16:13 (14); 16:23 (17, Back)
- **1 Corinthians:** 1:23 (14); 15:3-8 (25); 15:6 (2, 14); 15:14 (2); 15:45 (22)
- **Galatians:** 1:18-19 (25); 1:19 (12)
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- **1 Peter:** 1:24-25 (4); 1:25 (4); 3:15 (Back); 3:20 (5)
- **2 Peter:** 1:16 (2, 14); 3:6 (5)
- **1 John:** 1:1 (2); 5:7 (4)
- **Revelation:** 1:9 (18); 2:4 (18); 2:10 (18); 2:13 (18); 2:18 (18); 2:20 (18); 3:2-3 (18); 3:12 (18); 3:15 (18); 3:15-16 (17); 3:15-18 (18); 3:17-18 (18); 4:1 (18)

# About This Book

*Dug Up and Written Down* looks at the evidence that the Bible's history is real, from the first great discoveries of the 1800s to finds announced in 2026.

It starts with how archaeologists know what they know: layers, pottery, radiocarbon, and handwriting. Then it looks at the Bible's text, from the Dead Sea Scrolls to the earliest papyri of the New Testament. It looks at Noah, the flood stories of the ancient world, and the search for the ark, including the investigation going on in Turkey in 2026. It walks through the kings, cities, and officials of the Old Testament who have turned up in stone and clay, and the people and places of the Gospels and Acts. It shows what Roman and Jewish writers said about Jesus, and why the Gospels read like the accounts of eyewitnesses. It shows how the Law of Moses on washing, quarantine, and waste was thousands of years ahead of medicine, and what the Bible says about the beginning of the universe.

The book is honest about the evidence. Every major find carries an evidence check: confirmed, strong, debated, or not supported. A whole chapter covers hoaxes and hype that Christians should stop repeating, and the book names the questions that are still open.

It ends with the claim everything rests on: the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. Every chapter has study questions for personal reading or a small group. At the back are a timeline of discoveries, a guide to where to see the evidence, a list of words to know, sources for further reading, and a Scripture index.

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible, which is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.