

Archaeology's support of the history of the Scriptures

The Case for Biblical Archaeology: Uncovering the historical record of God's Old Testament people

John D Currid

P and R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2020

John G Leslie

The book *The Case for Biblical Archaeology: Uncovering the historical record of God's Old Testament people* is a well-written overview of the study and use of archaeology in the Middle East to better understand historical biblical events. The author is a known archaeologist and Christian teacher/writer.³ Its focus is on how the Old Testament historical writings and archaeology of the areas of those writings interface. It is composed of three basic sections after an Introduction:

Part 1: Geography/Topography covers the basic areas north to south, starting in Galilee in the north, Judean Wilderness, Negev, Coastal Plain, Shephelah, Central Highlands, Jordan Valley, and the Trans-Jordan. It briefly describes the terrain and key archaeology sites in these areas. It contains maps of the major countries in the region. *Part 2: A more detailed discussion* regarding geographic information as it relates to the archaeology of the region. This includes looking at specific archaeology sites such as Tell Dan (figure 1) and Tel Hazor and others in each of the basic areas. Included are several maps that focus on more local areas and include current political demarcations.

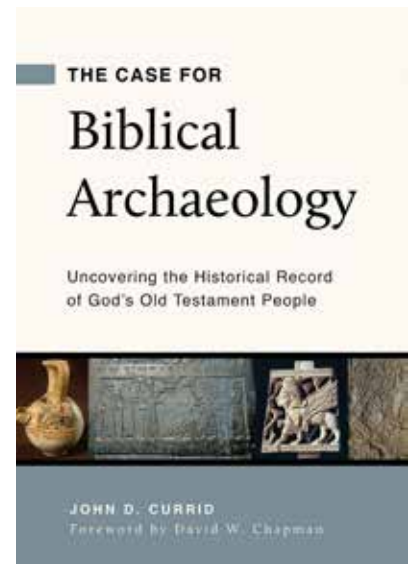
Part 3: An overview of the results/interpretation of the results of

archaeology as it relates to the culture of Israel in the Old Testament. Sections include agriculture, water sources, and architecture in the standard Chalcolithic, Early/Middle/Late Bronze Age, and Iron Age divisions. Pottery, use of Hebrew in archaeology (on ostraca, singular ostrakon, = broken piece of pottery), religious practices, and burial practices are discussed. There are frequent references/notations to various books of the Old Testament.

The book is composed of an introduction, 19 chapters divided into the three divisions mentioned above, and some appendices. At the end of each chapter are study questions, references for further study of the subjects of the chapter, and occasionally key terms. There are maps and various photos of key archaeological finds that support the biblical history and archaeology of some of the chapters. Examples include the Rosetta Stone (important in interpreting the Egyptian hieroglyphics), a Lachish ostrakon (documenting the Babylonian invasion of Judea), a Hezekiah royal seal, and many other items. It appears to be designed for a student to use.

Introduction

Chapter 1 is salient in that it briefly covers an overview of the field of archaeology of the Middle East, biblical tells (mounts where ancient cities were located), the process of excavation, and a brief history of the land from a hunter/gatherer phase until the Babylonian Exile. The author follows a traditional stagewise development of mankind from Neolithic (stone-age) → Chalcolithic (copper use) → Early Bronze Age → Middle Bronze Age → Late Bronze Age → Iron Age as an Old Testament format. He designates



the Neolithic as being from 8000–4000 BC. In this book he does not make any comments regarding time before the Neolithic.

He asks a question in the Introduction:

“... in what way does a study of the land of the Bible give us a greater understanding of the Bible itself? A primary purpose of archaeology and its related disciplines is to shed light on the historical and material contexts in which the events narrated in the Bible occurred. Archaeology helps to provide a life setting for the biblical texts, that is, a *Sitz im Leben* [the setting in life]” (p. 1).

He uses the invasion and conquest of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar as an example and shows a photo image of one of the ostraca sent by outlying Jewish troops that warns the people of Lachish that he, Nebuchadnezzar, was approaching them. Currid then comments that there are burn layers in most of the cities of Judea (or Judah) thought to be due to this event, and he mentions that 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36 describe the event. He comments that one of 18 ostraca has a partial note “In the ninth (year)” which is consistent with 2 Kings 25:1 “Now it came about in the ninth year of his reign ... that Nebuchadnezzar



Figure 1. Tell Dan excavations

King of Babylon came, he and all his army against Jerusalem”. He feels that “All data—biblical, archaeological, and linguistic, come together to provide an accurate picture of what happened at Lachish during the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians.”

Currid concludes:

“It is our contention that the purpose of archaeology (and its related fields) is not to prove the Bible ... It helps to demonstrate that the events related in the biblical accounts actually took place (p. 3).”

He goes on to comment that this is important because our culture is both “ahistorical” and “uninformed” regarding the history of the Bible.

Part 1—Geography/topography

Chapter 2 goes through the different regions of the area. For example, about Galilee, Currid notes that it is located in the northern region of ancient Israel and its climate is similar to the Mediterranean ‘wet zone’ with rainfall of about 14 inches/year. He notes that many forests grow in this area and mountains in the northern-most area are up to 4,000 ft high. Joshua captured it during his northern campaign (Joshua 11:6–15). Hazor and Dan are the northern-most cities in Galilee. He discusses the archaeology of Tell Dan in Part 2 (p. 77). In a similar fashion he discusses the Judean Wilderness, Negev, Mediterranean Coastal Plain, the Shephelah, Central Highlands,

Jordan Valley, and the Trans-Jordan (Jordan). Overall, with the maps, it gives one a sense of the land that the Jewish peoples of the Bible lived in and live in today. As before, there are questions at the end regarding this section as well.

Chapter 3 describes the history of the excavations of the “Land of the Bible”. He discusses the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, by Napoleon’s troops, which had an inscription translated into three scripts: Demotic, Greek, and Hieroglyphics. This enabled the reading of the Egyptian inscriptions. Currid reviews the research of Paul Botta and Henry Layard’s excavations in the Mesopotamian area in the 1800s (p. 29). Pilgrims and pioneers, who did topographic surveys of the land, are mentioned. Bible societies were formed as well—all in the 1800s. Tell excavations were begun in the late 1800s, e.g. Flinders Petrie’s examination of Tell el-Hesi. Other sites such as Jericho, Beth-Shemesh, Megiddo, and Gezer were begun. Repeated visits to these and other sites would occur. Increased sophistication would be developed in terms of procedures. This chapter allows one to sense the excitement of European Christians in the unfolding of information about the Bible.

Chapter 4, Tell Excavation, describes what a tell is and how they developed as communities in the past, coalesced partly for defence and local agricultural benefits. Currid briefly describes how archaeologists came to understand the structure of tells.

Chapter 5 is a brief, but longer than in the Introduction, description of the archaeological period nomenclature presently in use: Neolithic (NP c. 8000–4000 BC), Chalcolithic (CP c. 4000–3200 BC), Early Bronze Age (EBA c. 3200–2350 BC), EB IV–Middle Bronze Age I Transition (MBA c. 2350–2000 BC), Middle Bronze II Age (c. 2000–1550 BC), Late Bronze Age (LBA c. 1550–1200 BC), Iron I Period (IA c. 1200–1000 BC), and Iron II Period (c. 1000–586 BC). This chapter is helpful to the student and researcher when reviewing an archaeological report as it helps put the data into a broader context.

Part 2—A journey through the land

Maps that display the geographical areas of Part 1 are included in Part 2 along with short discussions and occasional photos of key archaeological sites in each area.

Chapter 6 discusses tells in the Sea of Galilee area (figure 2). Tell Dan (pp. 76–78) is mentioned as “a 55-acre site located near the foot of Mount Hermon”. It has evidence of being inhabited in the Neolithic, EBA, MBA, and IA. It has a prominent MBA outer wall with glacis defences. It had an arched gateway as well. It is first mentioned in Genesis 14:14 in which Abram pursued men who had taken his nephew Lot captive. Jeroboam I is listed as having a cultic complex there and a golden calf. It was still a cultic center during the time of Amos (8:14)⁴. Per Currid, Tiglath-pileser III destroyed the city in 732 BC. Other tells mentioned include Tell Hadar on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was inhabited in the LBA I, IA I, and IA II. Large amounts of carbonized grain were found there. Tell Hazor, “the largest tell in Palestine”, is discussed along with a brief discussion of the city structure. Tell Kedesh is mentioned as it is in an Egyptian Execration text (800–900 BC). It also was a city of refuge (Joshua 21:32). It contained MB, Persian, and Hellenistic remains. Tell Kinrot, Sha’ar Hagolan, and Tel Soreg are mentioned

as well. Each is important to an understanding of the history of the region.

Chapters 7–12 discuss tells in each of the other regions and how they associate with the history of the Jewish peoples in the land. One gets the sense of the ancient peoples living and distributed through the land.

Part 3—Aspects of society

Chapter 13: Agriculture and Herding. The author quotes Deuteronomy 8:7–8: “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees.” In this chapter he discusses how the domestication of animals and crop growing developed. Interestingly, he comments that in the Pre-pottery Neolithic there may have been herding of ibex, then in the Neolithic/Chalcolithic domesticated cattle and swine appeared. Trades such as smelting, ivory use, and pottery use appeared in the Beersheba area. He comments that the plowshare appeared in the Bronze Age. Cereals were cultivated, and an Egyptian panel of workers winnowing is on p. 163. Querns⁵ were used for grinding grain and have been found at archaeological sites and the process of grinding is mentioned in Isaiah 47:2. The Gezer calendar is mentioned in which the seasons for agriculture are listed. It was written in paleo-Hebrew script in about 900 BC.

Chapter 14: Water. This chapter discusses the access of water. He associates water management with agriculture and notes Jericho in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period PPNP (c. 8000 BC) as having some evidence for barley and emmer cultivation. Pithos jars⁶ were developed in the PNP, then cisterns as seen at Arad were developed in the IA, then shafts to water sources, example Hazor. Currid then summarizes a discussion regarding the Hezekiah tunnel and possible Canaanite shaft in Jerusalem (p. 173). It is clear from this chapter that water



Figure 2. Sea of Galilee and upper Jordan River Valley from the Golan Heights

was essential and sometimes difficult to obtain.

Chapter 15: Architecture. Currid reviews the use of mud brick which he says was used as early as Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNP) at Jericho. In the Middle Bronze Age stone bases and mud brick upper layers were used and field stone throughout some walls in the IA. He comments that many of the stone walls were “rubble masonry” as stone was plentiful in the areas. Plastering of the walls did occur in the Neolithic. Fortification occurred early even in the PPNP. Temple structure may be found in the Chalcolithic at Teleilat Ghassul. Formed stone occurred in the IA and the IA gate at Megiddo and is a good example.

Chapter 16: Ceramics. Currid comments that clay had been used in walls and clay “objects” before evidence of pottery. Some of the clay had even been fired. He comments that the origin of pottery vessels is unknown, but that clay-lined fire pits have been found at Jericho. Once developed, Currid states that the pottery, in Pottery Neolithic and forward, is known for its ubiquity and durability and thus can be used to chronologically date sites. Various shapes, sizes, and decorations were then developed. It should be noted that the Philistine black and red on a white slip is very artful. The common understanding is that pottery was hand shaped in the PNP and CP then the ‘slow’ potter’s wheel⁷ came into use at Megiddo in the EBA 1. The “fast” wheel is found in the MB II period.⁸

Currid talks about the importance of keeping pottery separated into groups and cleaning/washing it well.

Chapter 17: The Hebrew Language in Archaeology. Dr Currid reviews what many consider the origin of Hebrew starting with Hamito-Semitic or Afro-Asiatic. This is largely based on the conjugation of verbs. The sub-group is Semitic. The tablets found at Ebla, 2300 BC, helped to associate the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of Canaanite, Phoenician, and Hebrew. Further understanding of the development of Hebrew has come from ostraca found in various excavations such as Khirbet Qeiyafa. The mention of Yahweh is found on an ostrakon dated 9th–7th century BC. A key inscription was the finding of the Siloam Inscription (Hebrew), composed during the digging of the tunnel for water in King Hezekiah’s day, 716–687 BC. Currid mentions 2 Kings 20:20 regarding the digging of the tunnel in Hezekiah’s day. LMLK (“belonging to the King” in Hebrew) stamped jar handles are also found throughout Israel. Other relevant ostraca that verify Jewish presence in the land are listed, including the ones at Lachish which included an intercommunication among Jewish leaders regarding the advance of Nebuchadnezzar in 588 BC. The Ketef Hinnom silver prayer scroll is listed as well. The author documents the presence of the Jewish peoples in the land by the many inscriptions of various types found there.

Chapter 18: Burial Practices. Currid comments that, “Some of the earliest known burials in ancient Palestine came from the Natufian period (c. 10000–8500 BC).” So, it is clear that he accepts an intermediate to longer age for mankind on the earth than some others.⁹ He then goes on to review the burial practices in each of the standard archaeological periods. Probably all of the burial practices were associated with the religious views of the time period. He comments on orientation of skeletons and on a collection of skulls at Jericho that were covered with plaster (p. 218). Rock-cut tombs and anthropoid clay coffins have been found as well.

Chapter 19: Small finds. This is a collection of comments on various manufactured items such as flint tools and clay figures associated with deities in the Neolithic Period. Later bone tools appeared per Currid. Wood arrow shafts, combs occurred in later strata at Jericho. Unsmelted copper use occurred in the Neolithic Period with progression use occurring about 3000 BC and then smelted iron use about 1500 with the Hittites. Ivory from elephants and hippopotamuses came into use in the Chalcolithic Period. Glass, non-obsidian, has been found in glass beads from the EBA and vessels in the MBA. Glassblowing occurred during the Roman Period.

Currid’s appendices include #1 Basic Timeline of the Ancient Near East; #2 The Kings of Israel and Judah which helps to understand the united and divided Kingdom periods; #3 Extrabiblical References to the Kings of Israel and Judah including the *House of Dan Inscription* which mentions the house of David; the *Moabite Stone* which mentions a Moabite king’s victory over Israel in about 800 BC and many other stone inscriptions that include evidence regarding the Israel (Northern Kingdom about 800–700 BC) and Judah (Southern Kingdom about 800–600 BC) leaders and their involvement with other leaders of the region.

This is a nice summary of the inscriptions and it has several photographs to go with it;¹⁰ #4 Glossary—short but helpful—for example, a *favissa* is “an ancient pit near or in a temple that contained sacred objects no longer in use” (p. 247).

Chapters 13–19 and the appendices give a nice review of the human aspect of living and surviving in the various areas of Judah and Israel as well as Jordan.

Problem areas

Drawbacks to the book include: there is no mention of Noah or the Flood in the book, yet archaeological evidence exists including Mesopotamian ancient tablets and numerous ancient flood stories.^{11,12} He was and is a major figure in the Old Testament. Also, it seems he accepts a date for mankind that extends to 10,000 years ago (p. 217) which is also not necessary nor provable.¹³

Conclusion

Overall, it is a useful well-written book that gives a survey of the study and uses of archaeology and a cursory review of the history of the archaeological excavations of sites in the Middle East as they relate to the Bible. I do recommend the book as an introductory source for those wanting to learn more about biblical archaeology. As well, I am thankful for Christian academics such as Professor Currid who are helping people to understand the biblical scriptures.

References

1. “John D. Currid (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is Chancellor’s Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary. He has held several expedition staff positions, including ones at Bethsaida, Carthage, and Tell el-Hesi. He also served as the director of the Tell Halif (Lahav) Grain Storage Project. Currid has authored numerous books, such as the *ESV Bible Atlas* (with cartographer David Barrett, 2010) and *Against the Gods* (2013), both published by Crossway. He also served as senior editor for the *ESV Archaeology Study Bible* (2018) and contributed the notes to the Pentateuch in that volume.” Information from the book itself.

2. According to Lita Cosner, Professor Currid has made the comment: “At the base level, the issue is the same as it has been for more than a hundred and fifty years; does one hold to the complete truthfulness of the facts reported for us in Genesis 1 and 2, and especially in the immediate creation of Adam and Eve as the first humans or not?” He appears to take a literal view of Genesis and in the same article he is listed as a young age creationist. See article: Cosner, L., New book offers comprehensive critique of theistic evolution, review of Moreland *et al.* (eds.), *Theistic Evolution: A scientific, philosophical, and theological critique*, *J. Creation* 33(1):23–25, April 2019; creation.com/review-theistic-evolution.
3. He has written numerous books on the Christian faith including a two-volume set on Genesis—amazon.com/Genesis-Evangelical-Press-Study-Commentary and other books such as *Against the Gods*, *ESV Bible Atlas*, *Understanding Scripture*, *Doing Archaeology*, *Habakkuk*, *Ecclesiastes* and *Numbers*.
4. “As for those who swear by the guilt of Samaria, who say, ‘As your god lives, O Dan’, And ‘As the way of Beersheba lives’, They will fall and not rise again” (Amos 8:14 NASB).
5. “... the quern, which consists of a large, flat stone on the bottom and a smaller grinding stone for the worker’s hand (called a rider).” The worker would move the smaller stone back and forth on the larger stone to grind the grain (p. 164).
6. Large jars for storage—could be used for water.
7. The slow wheelbase needed to be pushed by the hand while shaping the soft clay with the other hand.
8. The fast wheel allows the wheelbase to be kicked with the foot while using both hands for shaping the soft clay into a vessel.
9. However, in reference 3, Cosner presents Currid as believing in a *de novo* (‘immediate’) creation of Adam and Eve.
10. This includes the Prism of Sennacherib; Obelisk of Shalmaneser III with King Jehu; the Tell Dan Inscription and a royal seal of Hezekiah.
11. Epic of Gilgamesh and Epic of Atrahasis mention a flood: see www.creation.com/gilg; and a general review at www.creation.com/noahs-flood.
12. trinitysouthwest.com/product/noah-flood-account/ or amazon.com/Noah-Flood-Account-Narrative-Representation/dp/1945750030.
13. Ages of ancient civilizations are difficult to determine, esp. pre-writing. C14 is often used to date archaeology sites but per Dr Andrew Snelling in 2017: “Specifically, we know that carbon-14 has varied in the past due to a stronger magnetic field on the earth and changing cycles in sunspot activity. So, when objects of known historical dates are dated using radiocarbon dating, we find that carbon-14 dates are accurate back to only about 400 BC”, answersingenesis.org/geology/carbon-14/radiocarbon-dating/. Dr Jake Herbert talks about assumptions in C14 dating as well: icr.org/article/rethinking-carbon-14-dating-what-does.