

# THE AUTHORITY AND SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE IN OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

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*Ignorance should never be an excuse to emend the text in order to make it understandable to the modern Western mind.*

The Scriptures alone possess the authority and sufficiency to explain who God is, to provide an accurate history of His deeds, to make known His will for His people in all eras of Earth's history, to save sinners from their sin, and to reveal God's plan for the future. However, readers and interpreters of the Old Testament (OT) too often make themselves and their knowledge the standard by which to judge the text. Reader-oriented linguistic, historical, cultural, and theological presuppositions create havoc with objective biblical interpretation. A secular education frequently produces humanistic methodology for interpreting biblical history. On the other hand, a humanistic approach to the OT need not be the product of either a secular educational or a liberal theological system. Even evangelical interpreters might impose their own erroneous presuppositions upon the text. In fact, arrogance regarding our own authority and knowledge can affect our treatment of the OT. As René Pache points out, there are three forms of spiritual authority:<sup>1</sup>

- the authority of the Lord *and* His written revelation,
- the authority of the Church *and* its “infallible pope(s),” or
- the authority of human reason *and* its self-styled sovereignty.

The last of these three forms of authority leads professing evangelicals to write and teach as though Scripture is *primarily* the product of human editors. This stance repudiates the biblical identification of divine authorship as the primary characteristic of Scripture (2 Tm 3:16–17; 2 Pt 1:21). The irony here is that while we decry the baleful influence of secular humanism on our culture, we might adopt secular humanism's view of Scripture. Secular culture has not negotiated away the doctrine of biblical infallibility and inerrancy, the evangelical church has done so.<sup>2</sup>

In the first quarter of the 21st century, new interpretive methodologies continue to arise, and the conservative theologian finds himself ever on the defensive due to his adherence to biblical authority. Carl Armerding's statement in 1983 still applies:

The issues persist today. They affect not only the evangelical scholar seeking to preserve viewpoints which radically separate him from his more liberal colleagues, but virtually

every student of the OT as well. University lectureships are given on the basis of adherence to critical thought, and textbooks are judged by the extent to which they affirm the current brand of critical orthodoxy, while popular television programs disseminate the latest theories to the waiting masses.<sup>3</sup>

Skepticism and doubt fuel the conflict between the secular and biblical views of history writing and historical events by implying a lack of accuracy and/or integrity in the biblical text. Note the subtle implications of historical criticism's three key questions:

1. What does the text say happened?
2. What actually happened?
3. What does the theologian and the reader understand happened?<sup>4</sup>

Conservative evangelical theologians cannot sit idly by, twiddling their thumbs, hoping that the madness might somehow end without entering the fray. There are vital issues at stake. How we approach the OT determines our theology. Evangelical scholars give up valuable ground to liberal biblical critics by adopting their methodologies. They attempt to baptize critical theories in evangelical waters without realizing that those methodologies have never been converted. Pressured by publishers and academia, evangelicals borrow the cloak of critical terminology to clothe their work. While there are valuable kernels of truth buried within contemporary critical studies, evangelicals must take great care to irradiate the material with the unadulterated Word of God so as not to become infected by the Trojan virus that saturates its thinking.

## THE LANGUAGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Scholars have employed the history of the Hebrew language as one of the considerations upon which to construct various theories concerning the canon and text of the OT and to engender doubt about the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for a correct understanding of OT history. In the 1,400 years (ca. 1800<sup>5</sup>–400 BC) during which the OT was written and canonized, remarkably few changes appear in the grammar and orthography of classical Hebrew. Did the Hebrew language experience so great a degree of change in those 1,400 years that it required editorial revisions in order that fifth-century BC readers might be able to understand certain passages in the OT? In reality, the Hebrew language was remarkably stable throughout the biblical period.

Extrapolation of the changes in modern languages (such as English and even modern Hebrew) in order to force equivalent changes in classical Hebrew rests upon a dubious understanding of the history of biblical Hebrew. Due to widespread development of communication media since the eighteenth century, many languages of the world have undergone tremendous change. However, we must not impose that pattern of change upon classical Hebrew. Two observations summarize a conservative approach:

1. Although there have been some very minor changes in biblical Hebrew from the earliest book of the OT to the latest book of the OT, it “has remained substantially the same down the years, undergoing changes that have appreciably affected its vocabulary but not, on the whole, its essential morphological, phonological, or even syntactic structure.”<sup>6</sup>
2. The Hebrew Bible has preserved without alteration many archaic forms, unexplained terms, and unresolved linguistic difficulties.

### THE TEXT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In what appears to be an abandoning of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, some evangelical scholars resort to postulating textual emendation in order to explain historical references in difficult texts. For example, Alfred Hoerth unnecessarily resorts to proposing scribal glosses<sup>7</sup> in his treatment of the phrase “in the land of Rameses” in Genesis 47:11.<sup>8</sup> His preference for later textual revision as an explanation makes his accusation against critical scholars ring hollow: “To accept the biblical account is now said to be naïve.”<sup>9</sup> It also contradicts his own principle that it is not a sound practice to emend “the biblical text to make the identification fit.”<sup>10</sup> Interpreters pursue such textual emendations merely because they lack sufficient knowledge to make sense of the text as it stands. Ignorance, however, should never be an excuse to emend the text in order to make it understandable to the modern Western mind.

While we may not possess any autograph (an author’s original) of the books of the OT, the state of our knowledge regarding the history of the text has made great strides since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid-twentieth century. Such discoveries enable Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva to assert that “the remarkably faithful work of the Masoretes assures us that the form of their text takes us as far back as the late first century of our era.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the Dead Sea manuscripts support the contention that the Masoretic text type had already been established nearly 800 years in advance of the Masoretes themselves: “It is clear from the Hebrew texts found at Qumran that the MT, on which modern English translations of the OT are based, is indeed an ancient text that was already stable before the time of Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> Such textual integrity reflects the OT’s authority and sufficiency.

Both liberals and evangelicals abuse the relationship between archaeological evidence and the biblical record. Far too many evangelicals have allowed the *a priori* nature of the biblical text to slip away by making it subject to external confirmation. In *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*, William Dever declares, in regard to the Merneptah Stela, that “one unimpeachable witness in the court of history is sufficient.”<sup>13</sup> He betrays his prejudice by elevating the evidence of an Egyptian pharaoh over the evidence of Scripture—he trusts the one and distrusts the other.

In a similar elevation of extrabiblical evidence, Grant Osborne identifies a scarcity of primary physical evidence supporting the historical event of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Then he observes that “there is a fair amount of secondary evidence for such a migration and *sufficient data to accept the historicity of the events.*”<sup>15</sup> His approach to the issue exalts material evidence over the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. The Scripture itself offers sufficient evidence for the reader to accept the historicity of the events of the Exodus from Egypt. We need not wait for “sufficient data to accept” any declaration of Scripture. In fact, evidence of any sort proves nothing without proper interpretation. As Duane Garrett points out, evidential details may very well be subject to revision as research and evidence collection continues.<sup>16</sup> Too many scholars leap to conclusions upon coming across the slimmest piece of extrabiblical evidence without realizing how limited our knowledge really is. For example, “Egyptian historiography for the New Kingdom is staggering for its meagerness, for its fragmentary nature, and for how much of it is really scholarly speculation...”<sup>17</sup> The same could be said of evidence related to ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>18</sup> Kaiser and Wegner put the matter quite bluntly: “Archaeology by itself is no more objective than any other evidence. It must be interpreted to be of any value, and that interpretation is subjective...”<sup>19</sup>

Instead of indicating a need for independent confirmation of Scripture from an external historical source, Robert Dick Wilson ably defended the *a priori* nature of biblical evidence in his classic work *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*.<sup>20</sup> Wilson believed that the Scripture’s testimony is sufficient in and of itself without additional external confirmation. Sadly, Dever’s problem is one that he seems to recognize in others, but does not see in himself. In his aforementioned book he asks:

How is it that the biblical texts are always approached with postmodernism’s typical “hermeneutics of suspicion,” but the nonbiblical texts are taken at face value? It seems to be that the Bible is automatically held guilty unless proven innocent.<sup>21</sup>

He almost sounds like Wilson.

When a scholar like Dever, who openly declares his own secular humanism<sup>22</sup> and who denies biblical inerrancy<sup>23</sup> and supernaturalism,<sup>24</sup> raises an alarm over the infiltration of the Society of Biblical Literature by radical revisionists<sup>25</sup> and deplores the deconstructionist tendencies of so-called literary criticism in the field of biblical studies,<sup>26</sup> it is certainly high time that the rest of us wake up and remove our rose-colored glasses. Tremper Longman accurately identifies some of the more extreme views of literary criticism as “the logical route to go once one loses faith in any kind of authority of the text.”<sup>27</sup>

An OT example concerning cultural debris evidence might help illustrate the difference between what current archaeologists and historians are saying about the text and a proper understanding of the text itself. Deuteronomy 6:10–11 and Joshua 24:13 reveal that the Israelites took possession of existing Canaanite cities, businesses, and homes, which they had not constructed or furnished. Evangelical readers of Scripture should not expect a major discontinuity in cultural remains in the period following the departure from Egypt. If any cultural debris survived from the Israelites’ forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, it would most likely be Egyptian rather than Israelite in nature. Likewise, one would expect an increase in intrusive Egyptian materials among the Canaanite remains of the Conquest period, since the Israelites had spent centuries in Egypt and had gained a large amount of Egyptian items at the time of their departure (see Ex 12:34–36). Indeed, distinctly Israelite cultural debris probably should not be expected until late in the period of the Israelite judges.<sup>28</sup>

A topic closely related to the ethnicity of cultural remains is that of pig husbandry.<sup>29</sup> New Testament (NT) references to Jewish involvement in pig husbandry (Mt 8:30–33; Lk 15:15–16) should be examined as a potential cultural trait dating back to much earlier times. In addition, since the social-science critic all too willingly compares biblical tradition with modern sociological data, why not compare ancient Israelite pig husbandry with Muslim pig husbandry in modern Bangladesh (something this writer has personally observed during fifteen years of missionary service in that country)? Either way, pig husbandry may not prove to be a dependable indicator of cultural discontinuity in ancient Palestine.

Observing ongoing skirmishes between liberal critics and evangelicals, Charles Carter identifies three areas of tension between evangelicals and social-science critics: (1) the uniqueness of Israel, (2) imposing modern worldviews on ancient Israel, and (3) the diminution of biblical exegesis.<sup>30</sup> V. Philips Long also deals with these tensions in his study of the historiography of the OT. He declares that “social science approaches often have little room for the Old Testament texts themselves.”<sup>31</sup>

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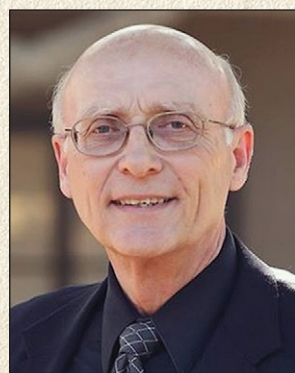
Fortunately, several excellent books have been published recently that address both the historical reliability of the OT and the viability of the biblical archaeology movement.<sup>32</sup> In addition, John Walton’s essay on the date of the Exodus in InterVarsity Press’s *Dictionary of the Old Testament* concludes that a 15th-century BC date may well be the best way to resolve the issue.<sup>33</sup> For one of the most embattled sections of the OT, Genesis 1–11, the exchange of three views on the text unit’s authenticity, historicity, and accuracy, written by James Hoffmeier, Gordon Wenham, and Kenton Sparks in *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?*, will enable readers to better understand some of the issues involved.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This essay has presented a very brief excursion into the matter of the authority and sufficiency of the Scripture in OT history. Daniel Block summarizes a helpful approach to the OT with four basic questions by which to address the OT text:

1. What are you saying? (the text-critical issue);
2. Why do you say it like that? (the cultural and literary issues);
3. What do you mean? (the hermeneutical and theological issues); and
4. What is the significance of this message for me today? (the practical issue).<sup>35</sup>

Above all else, the evangelical exegete/expositor must accept the OT text as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God. Adhering consistently to this declaration of faith will require an equal admission of one’s own ignorance and inability to resolve every problem. Our ignorance, however, should never become the excuse for compromising the integrity of the OT or avoiding preaching it expositively. The testimony of the OT is both authoritative and sufficient even in regard to its recorded history.



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