

# PAST EVENTS, PEOPLE, AND PLACES CONFIRM SCRIPTURE



By Bryan Windle

It's always interesting to hear how people describe the Bible. In a *Huffington Post* article from a few years ago, Jeffery Small declared,

I fear that an insistence on a literal or historical reading of the Bible will ultimately lead to the irrelevance of Christianity in our society. By throwing off the shackles of having to believe in the historicity of the Bible, we are free to interpret the stories as a testament to the religious experiences of people from a different age.<sup>1</sup>

Many would disagree about whether a historical reading will lead to the irrelevance of Christianity in our society (the exact opposite is likely true). However, discarding the historicity of Scripture certainly does allow one to freely interpret the stories however one likes. This isn't a good thing, though. Moreover, it ignores a crucial fact from which one cannot escape: The Bible claims to be a document rooted in actual history. Consider the following:

In the 480th year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, the second month, he began to build the temple of the LORD (1 Kgs 6:1).

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracónitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness (Lk 3:1–2).

These texts, and many others like them, do not sound like mere mythology or allegory. Rather, the authors are basing their stories in historically verifiable times and places.

The Bible's accuracy in describing past events, places and people continually demonstrates its historical veracity. Rather than being "shackled," Scripture is *anchored* to history, and ought not to be passed off as mere faith fables. Both shackles and anchors use chains; but where one enslaves, the other grounds and protects. Seeing the many synchronisms that have been established through archaeology between the biblical text and actual

history demonstrates that the Bible is a truthful book, and our faith does not rest on fairy tales. The following is a small sampling highlighting archaeological discoveries of past events, places and people that confirm the reliability of Scripture.

## Past Events

### *The Siege of Lachish*

In 701 BC, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked Judah. The Bible describes the siege of the city of Lachish as follows:

Later, when Sennacherib king of Assyria and all his forces were laying siege to Lachish, he sent his officers to Jerusalem with this message for Hezekiah king of Judah and for all the people of Judah who were there (2 Chr 32:9).

In the mid-1800s the Assyrian capital of Nineveh was excavated and the Lachish reliefs were discovered on the walls of Sennacherib's palace. They depict the siege at Lachish. One inscription reads,

Sennacherib, the mighty king, king of the country of Assyria, sitting on the throne of judgment, before (or at the entrance of) the city of Lachish (Lakhisha). I give permission for its slaughter.<sup>2</sup>



Portion of the Lachish Relief depicting Assyrian archers and shield-bearers, about 700–692 BC. From the Southwest Palace at Nineveh.

These historical events are also recorded in the Assyrian cuneiform prisms and confirmed by the archaeological excavations at Lachish. This is, in fact, an amazing number of diverse sources for an eighth-century BC event, all testifying to the accuracy of what is described in the Bible.

### **The Battle of Carchemish**

The Battle of Carchemish pitted the Egyptian army of Pharaoh Necho II against the Babylonian force of King Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC. The army of Egypt came to the aid of her ally, the Assyrians, in their struggle against the Babylonians. King Josiah attempted to intercept the Egyptians and was killed in battle at Megiddo (2 Kgs 23:29–30; 2 Chr 35:20–25). Pharaoh Necho II continued on, but was soundly defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar in the epic Battle of Carchemish. The prophet Jeremiah mentions this in Jeremiah 46:2.



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**Pharaoh Necho** (either Necho I, ~673–664 BC, or Necho II, ~610–595 BC). Bronze, kneeling statuette at the Brooklyn Museum.

Concerning Egypt: This is the message against the army of Pharaoh Necho king of Egypt, which was defeated at Carchemish on the Euphrates River by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah...

The description of the battle in the Babylonian records confirms the scriptural information.

The Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle relates the sound defeat of Pharaoh Necho's forces by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish, describing how he "crossed the river to go against the Egyptian army which lay in Karchemiš. They fought with each other and the Egyptian army withdrew before him. He accomplished their defeat and beat them to non-existence."<sup>3</sup>

### **The Death of Herod Agrippa**

Herod Agrippa, king of Judea, was the Herod referred to throughout the book of Acts. In the spring of 44 AD, while

hosting Olympic-style games in Caesarea, he was struck with illness and died. The description of his death in the Bible and by Josephus are remarkably similar:

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea....On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:19b, 21–22).

Josephus describes this event at the Caesarean games thus:

On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good) that he was a god....Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery....A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner....And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life.<sup>4</sup>



Michael Luddeni

**Image of Herod Agrippa I** (10 BC–44AD) on an ancient coin. King of Judea, he was the grandson of Herod the Great.

Notice the points at which the two first-century historians—Luke and Josephus—agree. Herod was struck with illness at Caesarea, while wearing a splendid royal robe, as the people hailed him a god. Time and again, Scripture proves itself reliable when describing historical events.





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**The black basalt foundation** for this fourth-century limestone synagogue in Capernaum is likely the remains of the first-century synagogue where Jesus taught.

## Places

### **Capernaum Synagogue**

In the Gospel of Matthew, we read that Jesus

went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Mt 4:23).

Yet, some critics have claimed that this is anachronistic, that there were no synagogue buildings prior to 70 AD, when the Temple was destroyed.<sup>5</sup> This, despite a clear pre-70 AD reference to a building used as a synagogue by Philo, plus an inscription from Berenike that describes repairs made to a synagogue.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, at least eight synagogues from the first century have been excavated, all of which predate the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, and the most famous of which is the synagogue in Capernaum.

The gospel writers of the New Testament describe Jesus teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum (Mk 1:21, Lk 4:31, 33; Jn 6:59). Today, tourists flock to the ruins of a beautiful white limestone synagogue in Capernaum. This building dates to the

fourth century AD, but was likely built over the black basalt foundation of the first-century synagogue, in keeping with the Jewish tradition of building upon a sacred foundation. Pottery and coins excavated under the black basalt foundation date the structure to the first century.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is probable that the black basalt foundation under the limestone synagogue of the fourth-century building is what remains of the actual synagogue in which Jesus taught.

### **The Pool of Bethesda**

The Pool of Bethesda was where Jesus healed the lame man who had been an invalid for 38 years. It is described in John 5 this way: “Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades” (Jn 5:2).

The Pool of Bethesda was first excavated in the 19th century, but it was only recently that the site has been accurately identified and interpreted. The findings were recently summarized thus:

The Bethesda Pool is described as having five porticoes—a puzzling feature suggesting an unusual five-sided pool, which



Jennifer Bartlett

**Ruins of the Pool of Bethesda** and of a Byzantine church marking the significance of the place where Jesus healed a lame man, as described in John 5:1–18.

most scholars dismissed as an unhistorical literary creation. Yet when this site was excavated, it revealed a rectangular pool with two basins separated by a wall—thus a five-sided pool—and each side had a portico.<sup>8</sup>

It's amazing to think that even such small, seemingly insignificant details in the Bible are being confirmed through archaeology.

### **Ephesus Theater**

The ancient city of Ephesus is one of the most excavated places of antiquity, as well as one of the most frequently mentioned places in the New Testament. When we compare the two, we find that the Bible and archaeology line up time and again. The Bible describes Ephesus as a religiously diverse place inhabited by people who worshiped the primary goddess, Artemis, as well as by people who practiced sorcery, Jewish people who worshiped in a synagogue, and Christians. Archaeology has confirmed all of this, from the discovery of the temple of Artemis, to the unearthing of magical papyri, to a menorah carving, to early Christian writings which describe Ephesus as the final home of both the Apostle John and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Even the lecture hall of Tyrannus has a measure of support with several inscriptions containing the name of "Tyrannus" having been discovered, thereby attesting to the use of the name in Ephesus during the first century.<sup>9</sup>

The biggest confirmation, by both size and popularity, is undoubtedly the Great Theater of Ephesus. This Hellenistic theater has a diameter of 495 feet and could seat an estimated 25,000 people.<sup>10</sup> It is the scene of the riot described in Acts 19 in which the tradesmen, angry at seeing their profit from the sales of idols dry up as people became Christians, stirred up a crowd and

rushed into the theater, shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (Acts 19:34). The theater is big enough to have supported the mob that resulted from the whole city being in an uproar (Acts 19:29), and it is located close to the agora (the shopping mall of the first century). One can imagine the anger spilling over from the tradesmen and shrine sellers in the agora, into the streets and then into the nearby theater, just as the Bible describes.

### **People**

#### **Balaam**

If there is one figure in Scripture whose existence has been doubted, it's Balaam, he of the talking donkey. The Bible describes Balaam son of Beor as a pagan seer whom the king of Moab hires to curse Israel. "Then he uttered his oracle: 'The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly...'" (Nm 24:15).

In 1967, a plaster Aramaic text was discovered in an ancient building in Deir 'Alla, Jordan. Dated to ca. 800 BC, the inscription reads, "Warnings [Sayings] from the Book of Balaam, the son of Beor. He was a seer of the gods."<sup>11</sup> It was found a mere 30 miles from the area where Balaam is said to have engaged Israel prior to their crossing of the Jordan River, in the plains of Moab.<sup>12</sup> This extra-biblical confirmation of Balaam's existence lines up precisely with how Scripture describes him.

#### **Jehu**

After being anointed as king, Jehu began well. He destroyed the house of Ahab as the Lord had commanded him, and he eradicated Baal worship in Israel. However, he did not follow God wholeheartedly, and God punished Israel by having other nations capture parts of her land. Scripture records,

Yet Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the LORD, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit. In those days, the LORD began to reduce the size of Israel... (2 Kgs 10:31–32a).

Evidently, one of the nations God used was the Assyrian empire under the rule of Shalmaneser III. In 1846, Austen Henry Layard discovered the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III while excavating the ruins of the ancient city of Nimrod. It records the events of his reign and the nations he subdued. One of the conquered kings whose likeness is carved on the obelisk is Jehu. He is depicted bowing on his hands and knees before Shalmaneser with his beard to the ground. The inscription reads,

The tribute of Jehu, son of Omri: I received from him silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king [and] spears.<sup>13</sup>





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**The Great Theater of Ephesus**, where angry idol artisans incited a riot against Paul, as described in Acts 19:23–41.



Steven Rudd, Bible.ca

**Balaam, the son of Beor**, is mentioned by name (yellow rectangle) in the Deir 'Alla inscription (dated to ca. 800 BC), which was discovered in Jordan just 30 miles from where he engaged Israel, as recorded in Numbers 24.





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**The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III** (ca. 827 BC) depicts Jehu, king of Israel, bowing before Shalmaneser, king of Assyria.

The Black Obelisk represents the only known possible likeness of a king of Israel or Judah.<sup>14</sup>

### **Gedaliah and Jehukal**

Jeremiah was a not a popular prophet, due in large part to his consistent message of doom. In Jeremiah 38:1–13, Gedaliah son of Pashhur and Jehukal son of Shelemiah, ministers of King Zedekiah, had Jeremiah thrown into a cistern because they did not like his call to surrender.

Two clay *bullae* (seal impressions) were recently discovered by Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar in the City of David, Jerusalem, bearing the names “Yehuchal [or Jehucal] ben Shelemiyahu [Shelemiah]” and “Gedalyahu [Gedaliah] ben Pashur.”<sup>15</sup> They were unearthed only a few yards from each other in strata dating to the First Temple period. These tiny clay seals provide striking evidence to the historicity of the people described during a crucial time in Israel’s history.

Time and again we see that the historical claims made by the Bible are accurate. Over 50 people described in Scripture have already been confirmed through archaeological research.<sup>16</sup> There are thousands of biblical sites which have been excavated in the Middle East. Historical sources have attested to scores of historical events recorded in the Bible.

Archaeologist Dr. Bryant G. Wood says,

In every instance where the findings of archaeology pertain to the biblical record, the archaeological evidence confirms, sometimes in detailed fashion, the historical accuracy of Scripture. In those instances where the archaeological findings seem to be at variance with the Bible, the discrepancy lies with the archaeological evidence, i.e., improper interpretation, lack of evidence, etc.—not with the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than “throwing off the shackles of having to believe in the historicity of the Bible,” seeing Scripture as anchored to history is powerful evidence that can increase one’s faith. Christians can stand assured knowing that the Bible is a historically reliable document.

*Endnotes for this article can be found at [www.BibleArchaeology.org](http://www.BibleArchaeology.org). Type “Endnotes” in the search box; next, click the “Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes” link; then page down to the article.*



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**The Seal of Gedaliah** son of Pashhur was found in the City of David, not far from a similar *bulla* bearing the name of Jehukal son of Shelemiah. These men, who condemned the prophet Jeremiah to be thrown into a cistern, are mentioned together in Jeremiah 38:1.

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