



Gratz Insider, Summer 2017 - Story Continuation

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How “True” Is the Bible?

Many people make broad assumptions about the Bible - that it is either literally true, word for word, or entirely false. Many people also assume that archaeology is a stuffy academic subject with little connection to the modern world. Yet, all of these common assumptions are mistaken.

Jewish tradition has never been entirely focused on the literal meaning of the Bible or on its word-for-word significance. In fact, the ancient rabbis often interpreted the Bible as metaphor or allegory or symbolism, and often understood the text in ways that are far from the literal meaning of the words themselves.

Biblical archaeology offers conflicting clues about the veracity of the Bible. Far from a purely academic subject, archaeology is a fascinating field, in which many clashing opinions about the truth or falseness of the Bible stand side by side in direct opposition to each other, sometimes even fueled by contemporary politics in the Middle East and modern polemics.

Some archaeologists are maximalists, meaning that they believe the Bible to be historically accurate. Others are minimalists, who see the Bible as essentially fiction, creative but fanciful stories about the ancient past written by human authors. And some archaeologists are somewhere in the middle, seeing the Bible as partly historically accurate and partly fictional.

There are archaeologists who insist that biblical stories, such as the life of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the kingship of David and the Temple of Solomon, are entirely fabricated and have no historical basis. Conversely, others look to the ancient Near Eastern world and find similarities in ancient tablets, such as from Nuzi in northern Iraq and Mari in northern Syria, paralleling the patriarchal and matriarchal narratives; or ancient Egyptian texts that speak of slaves making bricks for Egyptian building projects that parallel the Exodus account; or documents, such as the Tel Dan stela (a stone inscription excavated in northern Israel), that refer to “the house of David”; or ancient temple structures, such as in Ain Dara in Syria, that are almost identical to Solomon’s temple.

What should we do with all this conflicting archaeological information? Does it help us to determine if the Bible is true or not? It all depends on how we define the word “true.” If we are looking for absolute proof that every word and act in the Bible is historically accurate, archaeology can’t help us, because there are not a sufficient number of artifacts that have been discovered which confirm each and every part of the Bible. If we want to prove that the Bible is entirely fictitious, archaeology still can’t help us, because there are too many ancient artifacts that parallel the historical background of the biblical text. This leaves us somewhere in the middle, seeing the Bible as partially history and partially fiction.

Here, ancient rabbinic tradition can help. The Rabbis believed that the biblical text was full of truth, but they defined truth in a much broader context. For them, the Bible was not simply a historical

record, but a teaching about ethical and moral behavior, about sanctified living and about finding holiness in creation and existence. It is a truth that goes beyond simple historical dates and events.

We don't have to choose between minimalist and maximalist positions to find enduring truth in the Bible. We don't have to believe that every event in the Bible happened literally or that every biblical figure, from Abraham to Solomon, lived exactly as the Bible describes. It is the deeper meaning behind the events, as well as the values represented by biblical characters, that endure. The patriarchs and matriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, David and Solomon - these are markers in Jewish tradition that stand for faith and freedom, and these ideas will always be true.