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IS THE BIBLE HISTORICALLY RELIABLE?

By Eric V. Snow

For many decades, various liberal higher critics have maintained the Bible is largely a collection of Hebrew myths and legends, full of historical inaccuracies. But thanks to archeological discoveries and further historical research in more recent decades, we now know this liberal viewpoint is false. Let's consider the following evidence:

The existence of King Sargon of the ancient empire of Assyria, mentioned in Isaiah 20:1, was dismissed by higher critics in the early 19th century. But then archeologists unearthed his palace at Khorsabad, along with many inscriptions about his rule. As the Israeli historian Moshe Pearlman wrote in [Digging Up the Bible](#): "Suddenly, sceptics who had doubted the authenticity even of the historical parts of the Old Testament began to revise their views."

The Assyrian King Sennacherib was assassinated by two of his sons (II Kings 19:36-37), according to the Old Testament. But various historians doubted the Bible's account, citing the accounts by two ancient Babylonians--King Nabonidus and the priest named

Berosus—who said only one son was involved,. However, when a fragment of a prism of King Esarhaddon, the son of Sennacherib, was discovered, it confirmed the Bible's version of the story. The historian Philip Biberfeld commented in his Universal Jewish History: "It (the Biblical account) was confirmed in all the minor details by the inscription of Esar-haddon and proved to be more accurate regarding this even than the Babylonian sources themselves. This is a fact of utmost importance for the evaluation of even contemporary sources not in accord with Biblical tradition."

Likewise, some historians doubted the existence of Pontius Pilate, the Procurator of Judea who had had Jesus of Nazareth crucified (Matt. 27; John 18-19). But then, in 1961, an archeological expedition from Italy overturned a stone used as a stairway for a Roman theater in ancient Caesarea. This rock was inscribed with a Latin inscription saying (here it is in English): "To the people of Caesarea Tiberium Pontius Pilate Prefect of Judea." As Michael J. Howard said in the Baltimore Sun of March 24, 1980: "It was a fatal blow to the doubts about Pilate's existence. For the first time there was contemporary epigraphic evidence of the life of the man who ordered the crucifixion of Christ."

Similarly, the great 19th-century archeologist Sir William Ramsay was a total skeptic about the accuracy of the New Testament, particularly the Gospel of Luke. But as a result of his topographical study of, and archeological research in, Asia Minor (modern Turkey), he totally changed his mind. He commented after some 30 years of study: "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy . . . this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

In the nineteenth century it was frequently argued that Moses couldn't have written the Pentateuch because writing didn't exist in his day (c. 1400 b.c.) This was the basis for the documentary hypothesis ("JEPD theory,") which maintained anonymous editors and writers wrote the first five books of the Bible hundreds of years after the time of Moses. But the excavations of cities in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) have decisively smashed such suppositions about the lateness of writing's development. For example, the city of Ebla, which first began to be unearthed in 1964, was at the height of its power in 2300 b.c., and

destroyed in 2250 b.c. Some 17,000 tablets with writing have been unearthed at this site since 1974, which showed writing existed a thousand years before Moses in the case of this one city alone.

The New Testament also has much manuscript evidence in favor of its accuracy, for two reasons: 1) There are far more ancient manuscripts of it than for any other document of the pre-printing using moveable type period (before c. 15th century A.D.) 2) Its manuscripts are much closer in date to the events described and its original writing than various ancient historical sources that have often been deemed more reliable. It was originally written between 40-100 A.D. Its earliest complete manuscripts date from the fourth century A.D., but a fragment of the Gospel of John goes back to 125 A.D. (There also have been reports of possible first-century fragments). Over 24,000 copies of portions of the New Testament exist. By contrast, consider how many fewer manuscripts and how much greater the time gap is between the original composition and earliest extant copy (which would allow more scribal errors to creep in) there are for the following famous ancient authors and/or works: Homer, Iliad, 643 copies, 500 years; Julius Caesar, 10 copies, 1,000 years; Plato, 7 copies, 1,200 years; Tacitus, 20 or fewer copies, 1,000 years; Thucycides, 8 copies, 1,300 years.

Unlike Hinduism and Buddhism, which are religions of mythology and metaphysical speculation, Christianity is a religion founded on historical fact. It's time to start being more skeptical of the skeptics' claims about the Bible (for they have often been proven to be wrong, as shown above), and to be more open-minded about Christianity's being true.

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