



From Atheist to Theist (Part 10)

The Science of Archaeology

By

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An Introduction

Journalists deal in facts – lots of them. We eat them for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We snack on them at midnight. Facts, facts, and more facts! So, what can possibly convince an atheist journalist about the existence of God? Facts – and lots of them.

I found discussions with Christians about science interesting, but those about morality were a bit disturbing. I couldn't see, hear, nor touch morality, and there was no way to “test” creation theory in a laboratory. That's why I liked it when we started talking about archaeology and the Bible. Archaeology was something I could sink my teeth into because it dealt with things I could see, touch, and test.

One of the Christians I was talking with in early 1971 had just written a book about the Bible and archaeology and gave me a copy to read. The title is “The Philistines and the Old Testament.” It was part of the Baker Studies In Biblical Archaeology series (Dr. Edward E. Hindson, Baker Book House, 1971). I read through the book in a couple of days and was hungry to read more about archaeology and the Bible. I was fascinated by the “facts” available to anyone who wanted to test the Bible to see if what it said about ancient people was true.

The Philistines

One of the things I found most interesting was how archaeological finds about ancient peoples matched amazingly well with the ancient writings in the Bible. The Philistines are mentioned more than 200 times in the Bible's Old Testament, and what's written there is supported by many archaeological finds.

Some of the excavation sites discovered by 1971 included Ashkelon, Ashod, Ekron, Gath, Beth-shan, Beth-shemesh, Beth-pelet (Tell Fara), Gerar, and Gezer. Other Philistine finds included Megiddo, Beth-zur, Bethel, and Tell en-Nasbeth. What was found at the sites is important to understanding the connection between the Philistines and ancient Hebrews.

“Tell en-Nasbeth is probably to be identified with the Biblical town of Mizpah where Samuel (1 Sam. 7) defeated the Philistines. It was excavated between 1926-35 by F.W. Bade of the Pacific School of Religion, assisted by the staff of the American Schools of Oriental Research. The mound is about

seven miles north of Jerusalem. Jar handles found there with the word 'Miz-peh' stamped on them in old Hebrew letters led to the identification of the site as Mizpeh of Benjamin (Judg. 20:1). The fragments of Philistine pottery found here were from a time when the city was merely a country village but there was enough to show that the site was occupied in Samuel's day." (The Philistines and the Old Testament, Dr. Edward E. Hindson, Baker Book House, p. 78, 1971)

A Danish archaeological expedition excavated the ancient city of Shiloh (Tell Seilun) from 1926-29 and again in 1932. The team discovered that the town had been destroyed by fire about 1050 BC. This matches the Bible's details about the Philistines capturing the Ark of the Covenant at Shiloh (1 Samuel 4) after killing thousands of Hebrew soldiers.

The Philistines are first mentioned in the Bible in the Book of Genesis – "Pathrusim, and Casluhim (from whom came the Philistines and Caphtorim)." (Genesis 10:14)

“Most historians agree that they came from the eastern Mediterranean area but their original homeland and migration route are uncertain. It is quite probable that they stopped at Crete, called Caphtor in the Old Testament (Jer. 47:4; Amos 9:7). Also the term kerethi (“Cretans”) is used in Ezek. 25:16; Zeph. 2:5; 1 Sam. 30:14, to designate the “Philistines.” (ibid)

Abraham, the Hebrew Patriarch, made a covenant with Abimelech, leader of the Philistines, in Genesis 21.

“Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.” Genesis 21:32-34

Some have questioned the legitimacy of the Genesis account saying that the Philistines were not in the land as early as the time of Abraham and Isaac (20th and 19th centuries BC).

However, there is evidence of Syro-Phoenician sailors traveling across the Mediterranean as early as that time.

“Both Minoan and Mycenaean pottery and art have been found in abundance in Palestine long before the mass migration of the ‘Philistines’ there in 1200 B.C. Other evidence of early Aegean peoples active in Palestine are the anthropoid clay coffins found in Palestine, Egypt, and Nubia in relation to Philistine mercenaries stationed at these locations. The burial customs reflect Aegean practices (e.g., the gold foil mouth plates on the corpses) and contain Mycenaean pottery, indicating that they predate the production of Philistine ware. Add to these factors the evidence pointed out by Wright that the Hebrew word *pelistim* was used for all the ‘Sea Peoples’ without discrimination. Thus it is certainly not unlikely that Abraham could have had a commercial contact with an outpost of Aegean peoples trading in Gerar.”(The Philistines and the Old Testament, Dr. Edward E. Hindson, Baker Book House, p. 95, 1971)

Just The ‘Facts’

Dr. Hindson’s book introduced me to the study of archaeology and “artifacts.” I liked that word because it dealt with “facts” and that’s what I trusted – facts.

Dr. Joseph P. Free was Professor of Archaeology and History at Bemidji State College and wrote *Archaeology and Bible History* in 1950. I read his 1969 revision (updated just two years before I was investigating the subject), where he opened the first chapter with a brief explanation about the functions of Bible archaeology.

“A friend once said to the writer, ‘What is the value of archaeology in relation to the Bible, anyway?’ We pointed out that numerous passages of the Bible which long puzzled the commentators have readily yielded up their meaning when new light from archaeological discoveries has been focused on them. In other words, archaeology illuminates the text of the Scriptures and so makes valuable contributions to the fields of Biblical interpretation and exegesis. In

addition to illuminating the Bible, archaeology has confirmed countless passages which have been rejected by critics as unhistorical or contradictory to known facts. This aspect of archaeology forms a valuable part of the defense of the Scriptures, commonly known as apologetics. In summary it may be said that two of the main functions of Bible archaeology are the illumination and the confirmation of the Bible.” Archaeology and Bible History, Joseph P. Free, Ph. D., Scripture Press Publications, p. 1, 1969 Revised Edition

With a brief introduction to archaeology and the Bible, I was ready to investigate whether it could shine a light on my questions about the reliability of the Bible as an historical document and the truthfulness of its claims concerning the existence of God.