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Taken from the essay by Grisanti, "Approaches to the Study of the Old Testament"

Does the Old Testament Record Reliable History?

How do critical methodologies explain the historical reliability of the OT? Biblical scholarship offers five answers to this question that can be charted chronologically by tracing the history of consensus positions. At times these methods have coexisted to some extent and all three are embraced across the spectrum of biblical scholarship in modern times as well.

First, during the first 17 centuries of the Christian era, the vast majority of biblical scholars accepted the inspiration and authority of the Bible. They viewed the Bible's descriptions of various events as reliable, actual history and regarded the biblical text as divinely given. Of course there were a few detractors along the way, but even they did not abandon wholesale the general reliability of the biblical tradition. Modern biblical critics regard (and generally discount) this era as a "precritical" period of biblical scholarship.

Second, the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods fostered a significant degree of skepticism toward beliefs and practices that had been the consensus for centuries.¹ A growing number of scholars sought to explain God, the Bible, and science primarily through the perspective of a man-centered rationalism. The idea of the Bible being divinely revealed and authoritative became much less acceptable. By the end of the eighteenth century, Jewish and Christian scholars began to subject the OT to wholesale critical analysis. This led to a broad consensus in Europe and then America that viewed the OT as a written work that drew on various sources and demonstrated, in general, sloppy editing. The events and truths presented by the OT were considered untrustworthy and therefore not historical. Rather than granting divine revelation as the basis of Israel's function as a holy nation, these scholars viewed OT religion as the product of a long period of evolution from primitive paganism to monotheism (by the postexilic period).

Third, as scholars at the end of the nineteenth century began to discover and study literary and nonliterary artifacts from the ANE world, they began to realize that the world described by the Bible was not totally out of touch with the world depicted by the recently unearthed artifactual evidence. W. F. Albright and his protégés introduced an understanding of the OT that viewed the biblical text as generally reliable. Rather than creating fictional traditions, they suggested that the Bible preserved believable historical events and traditions. They may not have believed the Bible to be divinely inspired and authoritative, but they did conclude that it was a credible and reasonably accurate tool for reconstructing the history it described.

Fourth, the consensus of modern biblical scholarship is that the Bible is unreliable as a source for reconstructing the history of the events and characters it describes, especially when there is the absence of abundant archaeological evidence.² Since the amount of archaeological evidence significantly increases from Israel's divided monarchy period, critics are much more willing to view the biblical narratives from that period as having greater potential historicity. However, even when understood in conjunction with compelling archaeological evidence, most scholars still do not view the OT with much credence. To them it came into existence through a long oral prehistory, during which time various "communities" changed and reshaped the message of the OT to fit the needs and challenges of their own historical setting. A more radical subcategory of this last broad perspective on the OT (known as minimalism) dates the OT to the

Persian or Hellenistic periods and rejects any thought of the OT having historical credibility.

Fifth, the evangelical wing of scholarship (like the authors of this volume and scores of others) regard the Bible as God's Word, divinely revealed and inspired, presenting its readers with an inerrant and authoritative message. The Bible gives an authoritative redemptive message, and also delineates credible and reliable history. Although it does not "prove" anything in the Bible, archaeology illuminates, illustrates, supplements, and confirms the biblical record. The following section offers a few examples of recent discoveries that demonstrate that the historical context presented by the OT matches that suggested by artifactual evidence.

Recent Discoveries and the Historical Credibility of the Old Testament

The way higher critics have dealt with the OT has caused many students of Scripture to wonder about their cherished belief that God revealed His will to humanity through prophetic spokesmen over the centuries and whether this message carries divine authority. Is the long and complicated development of traditions that are the creations of authors, editors, tradents, and writers really how things happened? Was the nation Israel generally an illiterate society for much of its history until the period of the exile? Was actual writing limited to a tiny slice of Israelite society (those composing royal historical annals) that could not have facilitated the composition and passing along of God's revelation to His people in written form? Were any of the individuals mentioned in the Bible ever recorded in texts and cultures outside of Israel in a way that demonstrates some degree of credibility for Scripture?

Three recent discoveries may shed some light on the matter of the nexus of archaeological discovery and the reliability of the OT witness: the Ketef Hinnom scrolls, the Tel Dan inscription, and the Khirbet Qeiyafa inscription.

Ketef Hinnom Scrolls

Discovery of the scrolls. In 1979 archaeologist Gabriel Barkay discovered two silver scrolls beneath a burial chamber just southwest of the old city of Jerusalem.³ Silver scrolls like these would have been worn as amulets by the owner. After these scrolls were unrolled (a three-year process), they revealed on their inside surfaces very delicately scratched paleo-Hebrew characters that eventually were read as part of the Aaronic blessing (Num 6:24–26): "The LORD bless you and protect you; the LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the LORD look with favor on you and give you peace." Scholars have dated these silver scrolls to the late-seventh or early-sixth centuries BC. So, these verses predate the DSS by approximately four centuries. They are the only extant *biblical verses* from the First Temple period.

Key point of interest. All would agree that the discovery of these amulets does not prove that the Pentateuch was written by the seventh century. However, Barkay has pointed out that the confessional language of these amulets indicates that, *at the very least*, there was the preexilic presence of formulations also found in the canonical text.⁴ Waaler suggests that the presence of the priestly blessing in two amulets and the Hebrew OT (with little variation in the text of both) indicates a continuous written tradition before the inscription of the amulets (c. 700–650 BC). He also believes that the accidental character of an amulet and the sparse material from this time suggest that the amulets are not the earliest use of this text. In other words it would seem that the text included in a personal amulet would have had somewhat widespread usage at that time.⁵ Since these amulets belong to the preexilic period, they provide a clear challenge to an exilic or postexilic date of the combination of pentateuchal sources as is customarily maintained by critical scholars.

Tel Dan Inscription (TDI)

Discovery of the TDI. Tel Dan (formerly known as Tell el-Qadi) is located at the foot of Mount Hermon in northern Israel. After the end of the 1993 digging season, Abraham Biran and the dig surveyor, Gila Cook, discovered on July 31, an inscribed basalt stone (an expensive stone in antiquity), which was a fragment of a larger monumental inscription.⁶ Two other fragments that seem to be part of the same basalt monument were found during the next digging season. The main fragment contains 13 lines of text written in a dialect of early or old Aramaic.⁷

Scholars are unable to date exactly the composition of the inscription itself because it was not found whole or in its original setting. In light of other evidence found near these fragments, Biran and Naveh conclude that the basalt monument must have been smashed around the middle of the ninth century BC and would have been erected before that time.⁸ Other scholars have dated it to the late ninth or the eighth century BC as well.⁹

Key point of interest. For understandable reasons, scholars have focused on the meaning of the expression *bytdwd* in line nine. One of the factors favoring a reference to David's dynasty is the fact that this expression parallels the phrase "king of Israel" in line eight.¹⁰

Potential significance of this discovery. Although the contents of this inscription have triggered various debates on how to correlate the inscription with OT historical narratives, one of the primary contributions of the TDI was that its discovery marked the first time the royal name "David" or the expression "House of David" has been found outside the Bible. Of course this discovery and its potential function as a confirmation of biblical narratives has triggered a storm of controversy among biblical scholars.¹¹ There is no need to discuss the various interpretive suggestions that have been offered since the discovery of these fragments. A number of them were offered by minimalists who sought to reject any historical value the inscription might have.¹² Regardless of this debate, the strong consensus of scholars across the board is that the expression "the house of David" refers to "the dynastic name of the kingdom of Judah."¹³ This expression may refer specifically to the Davidic dynasty. Knoppers suggests that since the inscription comes from an Aramaic context, it more likely refers to "the state of Judah headed by the Davidic dynasty."¹⁴ The TDI commemorates the triumph of a Syrian king over the kings of Israel and Judah.¹⁵

Knoppers notes that the publication of TDI is important in at least two ways. First, although this inscription "proves neither the existence of the united monarchy nor the existence of Solomon, it does point to David as a historical figure."¹⁶ The expression "the house of David" points to the importance of David as the founder of a dynasty. The expression also suggests that this dynasty would have to go back at least a few generations. Second, the inscription militates against the suggestion that Jerusalem (or Judah) was not a regional state in the ninth century BC.¹⁷

What conclusions can be drawn from the discovery of TDI? First, it seems fair to assert that the inscription confirms a Davidic dynasty. Second, it does not *prove* that King David existed or that he had a reign exactly like that described in the Bible. Third, it demonstrates that it is feasible that the biblical description of David's existence is credible.¹⁸

Khirbet Qeiyafa Inscription (KQI)

Discovery of the inscription. In 2008 archaeologists uncovered an inscription that dates to around 1000 BC at Khirbet Qeiyafa in the Shephelah, near Azekah and Socoh (location of the battle between David and Goliath).¹⁹ The inscription includes five lines of text written in ink on a

broken piece of pottery. Scholars debate whether the language of the inscription is Hebrew, Phoenician, Moabite, or an early form of these languages. Although a rough translation has been offered by Haggai Misgav, the official Khirbet Qeiyafa epigrapher, work on the translation and meaning of the inscription continues.

Key point of interest. This inscription is the oldest extant Hebrew text. It does not refer to any known historical events or persons. It does not “prove” anything about the composition or historicity of the OT. Yet, it does demonstrate an important reality. Scribal activity was taking place in ancient Israel, even in frontier posts. Though KQI does not establish the nature of literacy in Israel in the eleventh or tenth centuries, it clearly speaks against the common rejection by minimalists of any credible literacy this early. Also the discovery of a fortified city from the eleventh or tenth centuries argues against the common minimalist suggestion that the time of David and Solomon involved a collection of unfortified villages. KQI would seem to indicate that in the tenth century the Israelite kingdom was organized enough to have fortified cities at important border locations.