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What Should We Think About Archaeology and the Bible?

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Archaeology is in the news again. An interesting juxtaposition of news stories concerns what might be the boyhood home of George Washington on the Rappahannock River and the claim that a collector has revealed an ancient stone tablet from Israel that might — hold that thought — speak of a resurrection just years before the time of Jesus.

The news about the home of the first president hit the media just in time for the Fourth of July. As *The Los Angeles Times* reported the story:

After years of searching, archaeologists have identified and excavated the boyhood home of George Washington, site of such legendary — if perhaps apocryphal — events as chopping down the cherry tree and throwing a coin across the Rappahannock River. The find indicates that the Washington family lived in a spacious eight-room home — a sign that the family was well-off for its day — and provides new information about George’s childhood, a period that has remained largely obscured in the mists of history.

The account is interesting, as is the ruin of the home. It turns out that the property had been basically known and preserved. The discovery of the foundation and ruin of the home came as that property was more thoroughly studied. The most significant aspect of the discovery seems to be the fact that George Washington’s father, Augustine Washington, was evidently a man of wealth. The eight-room home would have been a sign of exceptional wealth in that era of colonial Virginia. The discovery changes nothing of importance in our understanding of George Washington, but is obviously a site of significant historical interest.

The media attention devoted to what some call “Gabriel’s Revelation” is a matter of greater controversy.

Here is the issue as reported by David Van Biema and Tim McGirk of *TIME*:

A 3-ft.-high tablet romantically dubbed “Gabriel’s Revelation” could challenge the uniqueness of the idea of the Christian Resurrection. The tablet appears to date authentically to the years just before the birth of Jesus and yet — at least according to one Israeli scholar — it announces the raising of a messiah after three days in the grave. If true, this could mean that Jesus’ followers had access to a well-established paradigm when they decreed that Christ himself rose on the third day — and it might even hint that they could have applied it in their grief after their master was crucified. However, such a contentious reading of the 87-line tablet depends on creative interpretation of a smudged passage, making it the latest entry in the woulda/coulda/shoulda category of possible New Testament artifacts; they are useful to prove less-spectacular points and to stir discussion on the big ones, but probably not to settle them nor shake anyone’s faith.

The tablet is owned by a Swiss-Israeli collector and it “came to light” about a decade ago. The tablet itself is interesting, but as Professor Ben Witherington of Asbury Theological Seminary argues in the story, the reading of the ink-on-stone text is contentious at best. As for the text itself, even if correctly dated to years just before Jesus, the text at the crucial line is smudged and the wording is unclear.

TIME's story concludes with this:

It remains to be seen whether Gabriel's Revelation, and especially Knohl's [Israel Knohl of Hebrew University in Jerusalem] interpretation, will weather the hot lights of fame. Even the authors of its initial research seem a little dubious about his claims that it is a dry run for the Easter story. But, as often happens in such cases, they seem better disposed to a slightly toned-down assertion: in this case, that the Gabriel tablet does indicate a very rare instance of the idea that a messiah might suffer — a notion introduced in Judaic thought centuries before by the prophet Isaiah but which supposedly went out of style by Jesus' time. If that more modest theory gains traction, it will forge a link between a trend in first-century Judaism and one of Christianity's galvanizing thoughts — that God might throw in his lot with a suffering or even murdered man — that could contribute to a growing mutual understanding.

Van Biema and McGirk are helpful in acknowledging the fact that many supposed “discoveries” much-touted in the media turn out to recede quickly from attention. For example, they refer back to last year's media swarm over the so-called “lost tomb of Jesus,” and note that “despite considerable initial hoopla” the entire story is still regarded as speculation by many. The media attention moved to other concerns long ago.

All this raises the whole issue of archaeology and the Christian faith. Christians are understandably interested in the archaeology of the lands of the Bible. After all, ours is a faith that makes historical claims about persons and events with specific places, timing, and details provided in the text of the Bible. This was true for Israel and it is equally true for the church.

Our faith looks to the fall of the walls of Jericho as Joshua and the people of God marched around its fortified walls, to Jerusalem and the building of the first and second temples, to Galilee and the miracles performed by Jesus, to Bethlehem and the birth of the Messiah, back to Jerusalem where Christ was crucified and raised from the dead, and to a host of other places where the Bible grounds God's acts in history. Authentic biblical Christianity stands on these events as events in history, not as cherished myths.

For this reason, Christians are too often overly excited about the latest “discovery” that gains media attention — either in elation or travail. Archaeology is an important scholarly discipline, but it is not immune from ideology and many of the conclusions and arguments announced to the public are actually not at all what they first appear to be. Furthermore, archaeology is largely a matter of historical reconstruction, often with little actual evidence. As a rule, the more distant the time, the more difficult the reconstruction. That makes sense, of course, as time destroys both evidence and the preservation of memory.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christians were tempted to argue that the historical claims of the Bible (especially the Old Testament) had been “proved” by the intense proliferation of archaeological investigations that marked the period. This was the era in which William Foxwell Albright and his American Schools of Oriental Research were defining a new discipline known as “biblical archaeology.”

Then, especially after World War II, a new generation of archaeologists argued that their findings effectively disproved the accounts of the Bible. Kathleen Kenyon excavated Jericho and argued that the Bible's account was factually wrong. Others made similar claims.

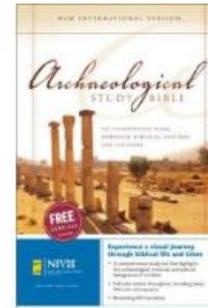
Those Christians who were tempted to place too much confidence in archaeological discoveries (and too little in the Bible's own claims of inspiration and authority) were shaken by Kenyon's “findings” and by similar accounts. This same pattern appears when the media give attention to stories like the “lost tomb of Jesus” or the so-called “Gospel of Judas.”

Archaeological findings are of great interest, of course. But the key issue is what kind of authority we invest in archaeology in terms of authenticating or disproving the text of the Bible. Christians err by accepting or investing too much evidentiary authority in archaeological “findings,” whether considered to support or to question the biblical accounts.

Authentic Christianity is based upon the inscripturated revelation of God — the Bible — as our authority. In the end, archaeology cannot prove or disprove the biblical text. Nothing can be found, or not found, that should shake our faith in the total truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Word of God. Archaeology can expand our knowledge and understanding, but cannot establish the authority for our faith.

That authority is the Word of God, and the Word of God alone.

See my posting at “[The Reading List](#)” for the *Archaeological Study Bible*, a great resource for expanding our knowledge of specific biblical texts.



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