

THE TABLE BRIEFING: ENGAGING SKEPTICAL CHALLENGES TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario

A STRONG SENSE OF HISTORICAL SKEPTICISM prompts many archaeologists and historians to challenge the reliability of Old Testament narratives. As a result, even ordinary details surrounding biblical stories now raise questions in people's minds: Could Abraham really have used camels? Did the Israelites actually live in ancient Egypt? How can Scripture be true if even the most basic details appear suspect? This Table Briefing shares key ideas regarding Old Testament historicity from conversations with Steven Ortiz, who teaches archaeology and biblical backgrounds at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Gordon Johnston, who teaches Old Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, and Robert Chisholm, who chairs the Old Testament Studies department at Dallas Theological Seminary.

HOW ARCHAEOLOGY RELATES TO BIBLICAL STUDIES

In an episode of the Table called "Archaeology and the Bible," Darrell Bock discussed with Ortiz and Johnston the nature and limits of archaeology.

Bock: [Archaeologists study the] physical layout of where people lived, the way in which their lives were constructed, what the rooms that they lived in looked like, the utensils that they

Darrell L. Bock is Senior Research Professor in New Testament Studies and Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas. Mikel Del Rosario is a doctoral student in New Testament Studies, Project Manager for Cultural Engagement at Dallas Theological Seminary, and adjunct professor at William Jessup University, Rocklin, California.

used. That's actually what you're finding. You're helping to give a portrait.

Ortiz: We're placing [the] text within its cultural [and] historical context. Most people who read the Bible [don't] realize that [the narratives in] God's Word occurred over a long period of time . . . in many cultures. . . . As a biblical archaeologist, I'm looking for . . . a lot of things that aren't recorded in the biblical text.

Johnston: Even things like grain or just skeletons of little animals and things like that, which for most people [who] are interested in the Bible would seem to be very trivial . . . help you reconstruct the culture and the history of what was happening.

Ortiz: If you think of what archaeology does, we're historians [who] look at the material culture [while] a textual scholar, a biblical scholar, will look at the text itself.

THE ABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Bock: When you think about archaeology and what it is able or not able to do, how do you answer that question?

Johnston: We have to have realistic expectations, . . . not trying to prove or disprove, but just to lay it out and see where the evidence goes.

Bock: You're trying to make sense out of the life that is reflected in the materials that are raised.

Johnston: And the material you find doesn't interpret itself.

Ortiz: Take Joshua's conquest. In the old days, archaeologists went looking for dead Canaanite bodies strewn around the Promised Land. [But] warfare is a lot more complicated. . . . We find burnt mud brick. We find abandoned cities. We put all that together, and probably the key . . . is historical plausibility.

Bock: Yeah, I can't recreate historical events. They happen once, whereas in science, I get to recreate the circumstances and test whether or not something works.

Johnston: When we talk about the Bible, [archaeology] is not going to be able to prove the intervention of God. You can find the right stuff in the right place at the right time, but archaeology can't put God there in the dirt, in the spade. And what the Bible's proving is that God was intervening here. So all we can ask is, "What we're finding in the dirt—does it match? Does it fit? Is it the right stuff, at the right place, at the right time, with the harmonization between the Bible and archaeology?"

Ortiz: What has helped me is all the CSI movies. . . . I say, "That's what archaeologists do. We find fragments of evidence, and we reconstruct. We know that an event happened. There was a crime here. There was a dead body. Who did it?" You've got to find all the pieces of evidence to reconstruct. What they do in the courtroom is provide the best picture or reconstruction of what they think happened, based on the scientific data, on rules of evidence, and that's what archaeologists are doing. We're taking those pieces of fragments and reconstructing the event. We're [asking], "Is the Old Testament account historically plausible? Here's what we know. Does it make sense compared to the pieces of evidence we find on the ground?" And that's where the debate happens.

Although archaeology cannot provide absolute certainty about the historicity of biblical events, details revealed by excavations can help Christians make a case for the historical plausibility of a text. But how do archaeologists from a variety of perspectives tend to view the Scriptures and their archaeological finds?

UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL CHALLENGES TO THE BIBLE

When it comes to the historical details of a biblical text, scholars who hold to a minimalist view tend to see less correlation between the biblical narratives and ancient history. Those who hold to a maximalist view tend to see much more correlation between the text and the archaeological data. Robert Chisholm joins Bock and Johnston in a discussion titled "Validating Genesis" that considers this difference.

Johnston: In mainstream scholarship, there's an agenda away from the Bible because there's a desire to try to explain the Bible historically, culturally, [but] without the supernatural. And

particularly [minimalists] try to refute critical events [like] the Exodus.

Bock: So why are they called minimalists?

Johnston: Because they're going to argue for a minimum of integration and a minimum of correlation between the Bible and archaeology and history. We would be maximalists because we're looking for a maximum amount of integration and harmonization.

Chisholm: This is really carrying on the tradition of the great archaeologists of the mid-twentieth century, [William F.] Albright and [John] Bright and G. E. Wright.

In contrast, minimalists argue that many biblical narratives contain anachronisms. For example, some suggest Genesis was written long after the time of Moses and that the author inadvertently let details from his own culture bleed into the Genesis narratives. In a *New York Times* article called "Camels Had No Business in Genesis," John Noble Wilford wrote:

Camels probably had little or no role in the lives of such early Jewish patriarchs as Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, who lived in the first half of the second millennium B.C., and yet stories about them mention these domesticated pack animals more than 20 times. . . . These camel stories "do not encapsulate memories from the second millennium," said Noam Mizrahi, an Israeli biblical scholar, "but should be viewed as back-projections from a much later period." Dr. Mizrahi likened the practice to a historical account of medieval events that veers off to a description of "how people in the Middle Ages used semitrailers in order to transport goods from one European kingdom to another." The archaeologists, Erez Ben-Yosef and Lidar Sapir-Hen, used radiocarbon dating to pinpoint the earliest known domesticated camels in Israel to the last third of the 10th century B.C.—centuries after the patriarchs lived.¹

Around the same time other news sources also ran articles suggesting Genesis was written much later than the time of Moses and that it erroneously presumes camels existed alongside the patriarchs² when it reports Abraham acquired camels in Egypt that

¹ John Noble Wilford, "Camels Had No Business in Genesis," *New York Times*, February 10, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/science/camels-had-no-business-in-genesis.html>.

² This idea was not new. Albright asserted, "It was only in the 11th century BC that camel-riding nomads first appear in our documentary sources. . . . Any mention

he brought back to Canaan (Gen. 12:16). His servant is also depicted as bringing ten camels back and forth from Canaan to Aram (24:10–11). Bock invited Johnston to explain the archaeological data related to this challenge.

Johnston: Alleged anachronisms [are] things that are [allegedly] in the wrong place at the wrong time, like Abraham riding camels. Critical scholars argue [that] camels don't come into the Middle East until about a thousand years after Abraham. On the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser [which dates from] about 850 BC,³ you can see camels [depicted], but that's about a thousand years after Abraham. And this is one of the earliest examples that we had of camels. You've got ancient texts that talk about camels in 1000 BC in Assyria. So, for the longest time, [some scholars] were arguing that the Bible is wrong on this, that the camels in Genesis are about a thousand years too early.

Bock: But that's not where things stand now.

Johnston: No. When two Israeli scholars [Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Yosef] were excavating in Timna [in Israel], they found camel bones [belonging to a camel with one hump⁴]. . . . But there are two types of camels: One-hump camels and two-hump camels. . . . The first time [one-hump camels appear in Israel] is about 1000 BC. So the Internet blogs went crazy: "These Israeli archaeologists proved the Bible's wrong—camels didn't exist in Israel until about 1000 BC." And that's true for one-hump camels . . . [but] this is important: One-hump camels were late; two-hump camels were early.

While current archaeology suggests Arabian camels with one hump, called dromedaries, may not have been plentiful in Israel until after Abraham's time, ancient artifacts, including drawings and texts, depict Asian camels with two humps, called Bactrians,

of camels in the period of Abraham is a blatant anachronism." William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968), 96.

³ See the artifact: "The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III - The British Museum," accessed September 7, 2017, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=426660&objectid=367012.

⁴ Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Yosef, "The Introduction of Domestic Camels to the Southern Levant: Evidence from the Arava Valley," *Tel Aviv* 40 (2013): 277–85.

in Egypt well before Abraham's time. Johnston explains:

Johnston: We've actually got two-hump camels in Egypt about 12,000 BC. You've got two-hump camels all throughout the ancient Near East by 7000 BC, and two-hump camels are domesticated by about 3000 BC. That's about a thousand years before Abraham. So what's happening in the popular press and in mainstream scholarship is that they're not making a distinction between one-hump camels and two-hump camels. Now, one-hump camels were for trade. Two-hump camels were for travel. Was Abraham a caravaner [involved in] trade, bringing products in with one-hump camels? Or was he using two-hump camels to travel? He was traveling. And where does he get his camels? He gets his camels in Egypt. And you've got these camels in Egypt 12,000 BC. That's 10,000 years before they need to be.

Bock: So we've got plenty of time. Is that what you're saying?

Johnston: We've got plenty of time . . . [and] we also have ancient Near Eastern texts. We've got texts from the time of Abraham, from Nippur,⁵ from Ugarit,⁶ from Alalakh,⁷ [and they] talk about two-hump camels. [We also have] rock carvings and drawings a thousand years before Abraham.

Bock: Oh, wow.

Johnston showed Bock photographs of two key artifacts:

Johnston: This is a cylinder seal. In the circle, there are two seated deities that are riding on the two humps of a two-hump camel.⁸ That dates to about the time of Abraham. Now, even if

⁵ A Sumerian text alludes to the milk of Bactrian camels, implying domestication. See Gleason Archer, "Old Testament History and Recent Archaeology from Abraham to Moses," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127 (1970): 17.

⁶ A Sumerian text mentions Bactrian camels in a list of domesticated animals. T. M. Kennedy, "The Date of Camel Domestication in the Ancient Near East," accessed September 7, 2017, <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2014/02/17/The-Date-of-Camel-Domestication-in-the-Ancient-Near-East.aspx>.

⁷ A fodder list mentions a Bactrian camel. Archer, "Old Testament History and Recent Archaeology from Abraham to Moses," 17.

⁸ See the artifact: "Cylinder Seal with a Two-Humped Camel Carrying a Divine Couple," *The Walters Art Museum: Works of Art*, accessed September 7, 2017,

somebody says, “Well, now we’re special pleading. You know you’re pleading for two-hump camels.” We’ve also got one-hump camels in Egypt . . . before the time of Abraham. This is a rock art drawing; it’s a petroglyph from Egypt a couple hundred years before Abraham.⁹ You’ve got a domesticated camel, a one-hump camel, being led about by an Egyptian.

While archaeological data can raise questions about details in the Bible, it is important to get the whole story. Dromedaries may not have been common in Israel during the time of the patriarchs. However, texts and artifacts suggest that Abraham could well have obtained Bactrian camels in Egypt, where they had already existed for thousands of years.

COULD THE ISRAELITES HAVE LIVED IN EGYPT?

Some minimalists argue that entire events described in the Hebrew Scriptures did not occur at all. For example, some deny the plausibility of the Exodus event because extant Egyptian records do not seem to mention Israelites existing in Egypt. Johnston and Bock discuss this in “Validating the Exodus.”

Johnston: Shlomo Sand said ancient Egyptians kept meticulous records of every event, yet there’s not a single mention of any children of Israel who lived in Egypt.¹⁰ . . . So he’s [saying], “If all that happened, surely we would have footprints.”

Bock: And while the Egyptian historical records don’t mention the Israelites residing in Egypt, there actually are some explanations for what’s going on.

Johnston: Yeah, there really [are]. The ancient Egyptians were a little bit ethnocentric. They identified only themselves individually. . . . People [who] lived to the east and to the north, we would call them the Canaanites, the Israelites, the Syrians, . . . had a semi-nomadic lifestyle, so the Egyptians referred to them as “the tent-dwellers” and “the foot-walkers.”

<http://art.thewalters.org/detail/27381/cylinder-seal-with-a-two-humped-camel-carrying-a-divine-couple/>

⁹ See the artifact: Donald Redford and Susan Redford, “Graffiti and Petroglyphs Old and New from the Eastern Desert,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 26 (1989): figure 42:3–49.

¹⁰ Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, trans. Yael Lotan, 5/15/10 edition (New York: Verso, 2010), 118.

Bock: What did [the Egyptians] call themselves?

Johnston: “The humans.” They had a high view of themselves, but with that lack of specificity, for critical scholars or skeptics to say, “The Egyptians don’t mention the Israelites,” well, they don’t mention the Canaanites by name [either]. . . . They don’t mention the Arabs by name. [To ancient Egyptians, they’re] all a bunch of “tent-dwellers” and “foot-walkers.” So we wouldn’t expect to have direct mention of the Hebrews.

Bock: [But you say] Egyptian records actually do mention Semitic slaves in Egypt with Hebrew names?

Johnston: We’ve got this papyrus¹¹ from the northeast delta region of Egypt, where the Hebrews would’ve been. It dates to 1700 BC, around the time that Joseph came down to Egypt, the time that the Hebrews would’ve been in Egypt. This papyrus has a list of 95 names of runaway household slaves. Of those 95 names, 45 are Semitic names . . . ten of these names are Hebrew names or Hebrew-like names. So we’ve got the right [people] in the right place. You’ve got the feminine form of Jacob, *’Aqoba*, the feminine form of Asher, *’Ashera*, the feminine form of Job, *’Ayuvung*. You have the compound name for David, *Dawidi-huat*.

Bock: So we’ve got evidence of some type of Hebrew presence by these names.

Johnston: At least Hebrew-like names.

Bock: There’s a cultural thing going on here too, right?

Johnston: That’s right. . . . Shlomo was arguing that the Egyptians kept meticulous records of everything. That’s really an overstatement. The Egyptian scribes were not just sober, objective historians. They were royal scribes . . . employed by the king to make him look good. They didn’t record everything that happened. They recorded the mighty deeds of Pharaoh and had them inscribed on the walls, the memorial temples, and the walls of the major buildings for everybody to see. They don’t

¹¹ Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446.

[record] failures or defeats of Pharaoh.

Bock: So when the pharaoh looks bad, they just don't talk about it?

Johnston: They don't talk about it. So we wouldn't expect the Egyptian records to mention the Exodus. We wouldn't expect them to acknowledge it.¹²

IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

As academics and popular news sources challenge the plausibility of biblical narratives, these ideas enter everyday conversations. Chisholm and Bock discuss responding to such challenges.

Chisholm: There's a lot of tension these days, [in the] Palestinian versus Israeli [conversation]. And so some minimalists . . . promote the theory that Israel's history is concocted. It's made up. If you can undermine the reliability of the patriarchal accounts and Old Testament history, then guess who doesn't have a right to the land [of Israel] anymore? So they view it positively as, "If we can just get people to get away from these legends, maybe we can do something constructive over there."

Bock: [So this relates] directly to what's going on in Scripture [and] also spills over into the way it's being utilized in conversations that we have about realities that people are facing and things that they're debating today.

Chisholm: Yeah. . . . I was doing evangelism at the Denton Arts Festival, and there was a fellow [who] was kind of watching and he came over and I started to share the gospel with him. He says, "You take the Bible seriously, huh?" I go, "Yeah, I do." He says, "Well you know I was reading this book about how Israelite religion evolved from [poly]theism. You know there were these gods, *yam*". . . . And I said, "Oh, you're talking about the theory that Israelite religion evolved out of Ugaritic Canaanite myth." . . . I took about ten minutes and engaged him and explained to him. He'd read this book, and he was

¹² This conversation also included a discussion of potentially positive evidence for the Exodus. See <https://voice.dts.edu/chapel/cultural-engagement-chapel-the-exodus-bock-darrell-l-johnston-gordon-h/>

looking at the evidence the way it had been laid out by the author of the book. I took that same evidence and explained it a different way. And it was like a light came on. He goes, “Wow, that’s really interesting.” He says, “You’ve just given me a whole different way of looking at this.” Now that that shield was down, . . . I said, “Now let’s talk about your sin and what Jesus did about it.” Because I don’t play around. And he became receptive. He listened. . . . It was amazing that the Lord brought him to me.

This exchange is one example of how training in Bible backgrounds can be a helpful part of evangelism. As Bock notes, “For many people, the Bible isn’t the answer—it’s the question.” As a result, Christians who begin spiritual conversations may meet difficult questions. How should believers respond to these challenges? Bock explains two approaches to defending Christian truth claims:

Bock: Sometimes, within Christian circles, we get a debate between presuppositionalists . . . and evidentialists. . . . It’s almost as if those two [apologetic methods] are in conflict with one another, and sometimes it’s presented that way, which is a little bit unfortunate.

Here’s what I think is going on, and it’s important to remember. . . . For presuppositionalists, it’s an insult to the Bible and an insult to God to try to defend it: “God doesn’t need defending. You just present [biblical truth], and people are accountable [to God for their response to his revelation].” . . . But the evidentialist says, “Now wait a minute. The moment you say, ‘The Bible says,’ to someone who’s not a believer, . . . they want to know why they should even care about Scripture and what it has to say.” This [background] material [may] give pause to the person who has never thought about the Bible seriously [by saying], “There are some things here that fit [ancient history and] that tell us that the story and the contents within it are worth paying attention to and seeing what they’re all about.” And that’s the evidentialist side of the equation, if you will. Evidentialism is more necessary now than in the past because many people no longer regard the Bible as valuable. Older presuppositional models that depend on a shared respect for the Bible no longer work.

Books and [television] specials that show up particularly at Christmas and Easter are seen by millions of people at the same time. And for someone who never darkens the door of a church, their understanding of religion and history is framed

by those documentaries. . . . So as a minister of the Word, wherever you're ministering, when someone brings a question that's been in the public sphere and you show there is a coherent response, you do something positive in thinking about how the Scripture is seen.

CONCLUSION

Historical skepticism has cast doubt on the general reliability of the Bible and even of ordinary details within biblical stories. While some interpretations of archaeological data may seem to challenge details in the Old Testament, an array of discoveries can help people see the plausibility of the accounts. The evidence suggesting that Abraham likely obtained Bactrian camels in Egypt and the presence of Hebrew-like names in ancient Egypt are two examples. Churches must help believers better understand and respond to these kinds of public square issues in order to engage the culture as ambassadors of Christ. Knowing aspects of the background and cultural context can aid in responding to the skepticism some raise about Scripture. Keeping in touch with these findings can encourage faith in Scripture and open avenues for fresh dialogue.

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