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Chapter Two
Archaeology and the World of the Old Testament

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Key Terms

Asia Minor Laying outside the bounds of the Fertile Crescent, this area played a very influential role in biblical history. Central Asia Minor was the center of the Hittite Empire.

Assyrians One of two groups of descendants of the Akkadians. Their empire greatly expanded in the late eighth century B.C.E. and, along with the Babylonians, eventually led to the destruction of Israel's national institutions.

Babylonians One of two groups of descendants of the Akkadians. Their empire greatly expanded in the early sixth century B.C.E. and, along with the Assyrians, eventually led to the destruction of Israel's national institutions. The Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem brought an end to the last remaining part of the Israelite monarchy, the dynasty of David in Judah, an event recorded in the Old Testament in II Kings 24 and II Chronicles 36.

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Bronze Age Time periods in the ancient world are often divided according to the dominant metal used in making weapons and tools. There are no precise beginning and end points, but bronze replaced copper by about 3000 B.C.E. and was succeeded by iron by about 1200 B.C.E. The biblical matriarchs and patriarchs likely lived during the latter portion of this period.

Cuneiform The earliest known form of writing, dating back to around 3000 B.C.E. It utilized a stylus with a pointed tip to make characteristically wedge-shaped markings on soft clay tablets, which were then hardened in ovens. Akkadian and Ugaritic are the two most significant languages that used this system, the latter of which is closely connected to Hebrew in terms of vocabulary and grammar.

Cush The name "Cush" appears a number of times in the Old Testament, from describing the location of one of the four rivers that flows out of the Garden of Eden, to being the name of the father of Nimrod. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, Cush was regularly rendered as "*Aithiops*," so the Greek translators apparently associated this word automatically with an East African location, related to the area we refer to today as Ethiopia.

Cyrus Cylinder A stone cylinder with writing inscribed on it discovered In 1879 by archaeologists from the British Museum working at the site of ancient Babylon. The inscription has been dated to the sixth century B.C.E., and the writing tells about Cyrus, king of Persia, granting freedom to groups of people captured and held captive by the Babylonians, whom Cyrus had defeated.

Dead Sea Scrolls This is the convenient name given to a diverse collection of scrolls found in the Judean Desert during the middle of the twentieth century, which are approximately two thousand to two thousand and two hundred years old. The scrolls fall roughly into three categories: (1) copies of books found in the various Old Testament canons, (2) copies of texts from Second Temple Judaism, some of which have been found in other places, and (3) sectarian texts that seem to belong.

Egypt An area in North Africa. Its fertile area is a narrow strip of land along the Nile River, and there the river breaks up into many branches before entering the Mediterranean Sea. Egypt was separated from the rest of the Fertile Crescent by the land bridge of Palestine and the Sinai Desert.

Fertile Crescent An arch-shaped area of land formed by the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys and the strip of land along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. This was the path that all travelers had to follow between the Persian Gulf at one and North Africa at the other.

Gilgamesh Archaeological expeditions in Mesopotamia in the nineteenth century produced a large collection of ancient texts that tell stories of a great hero named Gilgamesh. This epic figure likely has some connection to an actual king of Uruk named

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Gilgamesh, but the significance of the literary hero far outweighs that of the historical king. The mother of Gilgamesh was a goddess and his father was a human, so he resembles the half-human, half-divine giants described in Genesis 6:1–4.

Hittites A group of people known in the Old Testament as the "sons of Heth." They pushed down from Asia around 1400 B.C.E. into what is now known as Lebanon and Syria.

Iron Age The period beginning about 1200 B.C.E., when iron was the dominant metal used for making tools and weapons. The Israelites would have appeared in the land of Canaan around the beginning of this period.

Levant A French term designating the general area surrounding the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. Archaeologists and historians sometimes use this term as a nonpolitical designation for the land area that includes Israel.

Merneptah Stele An Egyptian standing stone monument with writing inscribed on it. Merneptah was a king of Egypt in the late thirteenth century B.C.E. who recorded many of the results of his military campaigns and building projects on such monuments. It includes a list of military exploits in the region of Canaan, including the defeat of something called "Israel."

Mesopotamia The general term for the land area in the southwest region of Asia, around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which is the location of the modern nation of Iraq. This term itself is not used in the Bible, but this area was the home of empires such as those of Assyria and Babylon, which played a prominent role in Israel's story.

Philistines A group of people who occupied the coastal cities along the eastern and southeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the Late Bronze through Early Iron ages. They were a seafaring people who settled there, either after having been repulsed in an attack on Egypt or as mercenaries placed there by the Egyptians after being conquered by them. They were a persistent enemy of the Israelites; thus, the Bible paints them in a rather negative light. Recent archaeological and anthropological studies have produced a more positive portrait of these ancient people.

Sumer An area in the Fertile Crescent, near the Persian Gulf in what is now Kuwait and Iraq. The people, called Sumerians, occupied a number of city-states that dominated the lower Mesopotamian region from 3150 to 2350 B.C.E. and again from 2060 to 1950 B.C.E. The Sumerians invented cuneiform and introduced counting by sixties (the method we use to count seconds and minutes).

Tell A flat-topped mound left behind by the accumulation of material from a long succession of human settlement at a particular location. Vertical trenches dug into these mounds reveal the layers left behind in different periods of settlement.

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Answers to Study Questions

1. The Merneptah Stele is a standing stone monument with writing inscribed on it. Merneptah was a king of Egypt in the late thirteenth century B.C.E who recorded many of the results of his military campaigns and building projects on such monuments. The Merneptah Stele contains a list of military exploits in the region of Canaan, which includes the defeat of something called "Israel." This defeat of Israel may or may not be true. Scholars also don't know if Merneptah thought of Israel as a group of people, a territory, or some combination of the two. Regardless, there is evidence that something existed at that time that was significant enough for a king of Egypt to use this term.

2. In its early stages, biblical archaeology was funded and carried out by people who wanted to prove the Old Testament to be historically accurate. Some people still engage in biblical archaeology for this reason, but it is less common. Ideally, conclusions now come from evidence, though individual interpretation of the evidence is still necessary.

3. In the Middle East, the two major types of archaeology are the archaeology of tells (mounds that are the result of centuries of building, destruction, and rebuilding on the same site) and surface archaeology (takes place in areas that were never densely populated and where tells never developed). In the archaeology of tells, archaeologists have to do a great deal of digging, both horizontally and vertically, but they can often establish a timeline for various layers of settlement at a particular site. In surface archaeology, little to no digging is required, but its challenge is to cover large areas of land to find widely dispersed artifacts.

4. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain copies of books that are in the Old Testament. The evidence they provide works in two ways. The scrolls that are still reasonably intact are very much like the later manuscripts that we have been using to produce modern versions of the Old Testament. Thus, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, some people see proof of the reliability of the Old Testament. The scrolls also have significant variation, so some see evidence that the Old Testament is one particular expression of what was once a more diverse set of traditions.

5. Archaeological finds from other civilizations can provide mentions or discussions of events related to Israel, such as defeats in battle by these civilizations. These show that some group or entity that went by the name Israel did in fact exist in ancient times. These finds, if in the form of written records or stories, can also show where writers of the Old Testament might have found inspiration for or influences on their writing.

6. The Fertile Crescent is an arch-shaped strip of land running from Mesopotamia north and west into what is modern day Turkey. In the Ancient Near East, this strip formed the travel route from the Mesopotamian empires to Canaan, along the Mediterranean Sea coast, which could be followed into Egypt, the great Western empire. The land that the Israelites eventually occupied and controlled to some extent was the only route to travel between these two empires. This meant that large amounts of commercial trade passed

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through Israel, enriching it economically and culturally, but it also meant that the armies of the great empires marched through leaving destruction behind them.

7. The Sumerians likely developed the earliest form of writing and the ideas of their culture permeated much of the Ancient Near East. The Akkadians were likely ethnic ancestors of the Israelites. Their culture also fed into the cultures of later empires in Mesopotamia, such as Babylon and Assyria. The Amorites were also ancestors of the Israelites who migrated westward along the Fertile Crescent. The Hurrians followed the dominance of the Amorites and carried forward many components of their culture. Some of their written texts provide helpful information for interpreting the Bible. The Arameans were descendants of the Amorites, whose semi-nomadic lifestyle was much like the ancient Israelites. The Arameans seem to be linked to a mysterious group of people mentioned in many ancient writings called the Habiru. These were also semi-nomadic people whose name is similar to Hebrews. The Hittites pushed down from Asia into what is now Lebanon and Syria, and threatened the power of Egypt

8. The regular rise and fall of the Nile River in Egypt allowed this land to be fertile even when others around it were suffering from drought. Therefore, people, like the ancestors in Genesis, often traveled to Egypt during famines.

9. Ugarit was a city along the Mediterranean coast during a time that overlaps with the earliest biblical stories. The writings discovered there, the Ras Shamra tablets, contain many parallels to the Old Testament.

10. The four major divisions of Palestine are the coastal plain, the central hill country, the Jordan Rift, and the Transjordan Plateau.

11. The land along the Jordan River is rocky and not very suitable for agriculture, even though it is near a water source. Also, the Jordan River floods during a time of year that would damage young crops planted near it.

12. The two major north- south roads in Palestine were “the Way of the Sea” and the King’s Highway.” They provided access from Asia Minor to the Philistine city-states and Egypt.

Teaching Suggestions

1. Images of ancient writings, such as the Ras Shamra Tablets or Ebla Tablets, are available on-line. Have students locate these and report on the content and nature of these writings.

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2. Translations of ancient texts like the Gilgamesh Epic and the Enuma Elish are also available on-line. Have students read portions of these that are similar to the Bible. What does it mean that the cultures around Israel produced similar literature and have similar cultures? Does it change the way we understand the Bible when we discover that there are older writings that are similar?

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