**Biblical Minimalism**

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**Evidence of Israel in Ancient Egyptian Manuscripts**

The first example is the Merneptah Stele, which dates to ca. 1215 BC during the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah. The Merneptah Stele is generally believed to contain the earliest reference to Israel found in any ancient text. It almost certainly is not the oldest reference to the Israelites in Egyptian texts, which is the subject of a future paper now being written by the Egyptologist Charles Aling. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for modern critical OT scholars to write about their textual theories on the Pentateuch, the Exodus, and the development of the Israelite tribes, and not even mention the Merneptah Stele. The famous Jewish archaeologist Amnon Ben-Tor in an interview expressed to me his own frustration with the many “minimalist” OT scholars who ignore the Merneptah Stele in their theories.

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**The Plausibility of the Biblical Record**

Archaeology demonstrates solid connections between the biblical record and ancient history, in contrast to Christopher Hitchens’ assertion that it is an implausible record. Consider the following:

**The Patriarchs**

Critics often malign the patriarchs without just cause. They insist that camels were not domesticated during the patriarchal age, thus constituting an anachronism in the biblical text. Yet evidence of camel domestication appears as early as 2000 B.C. in several places in Mesopotamia, concurrent with Abraham—if not slightly preceding him (Kitchen, 2003, p. 339). Another point of confidence is the names of the patriarchs. While God selected Jacob’s name, they all highlight the Mesopotamian roots of Abraham since the names of Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, and Joseph are all of Amorite origin (pp. 341-342). These names were at the height of their popularity when the patriarchs lived in the early second millennium and quickly fell into disuse in subsequent centuries.

A vital piece of evidence is the structure of covenants in the Bible. Covenants made in antiquity evolved over time, and each period has a distinct structure for the covenants made at various times and particular locations. Kenneth Kitchen has surveyed a wide range of covenants used from the third millennium through the first millennium B.C. (Kitchen, 2003, pp. 283-289). He found the Abrahamic covenant made in Genesis 15-17 fits securely in the early second millennium, while the covenants in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua 24 fit only in a late second millennium context.

**The Life of Joseph**

In the very section of the Bible that Hitchens questions is found some of the most compelling evidence for the historicity of Scripture. As Egyptologist James K. Hoffmeier demonstrates, the story for Joseph rings true with numerous details (Hoffmeier, 1996, pp. 77-98). The 20-shekel price paid for Joseph (Genesis 37:28) is consistent with the price of a slave c. 1700 B.C. Egyptian mummification took about 70 days once the period for mourning was included, which matches the time given for the mummification of Jacob (Genesis 50:3). Examples of non-Egyptians becoming viziers is known from Egyptian sources. Further, it appears that the story of Joseph was put down in writing during the 18th-19th Dynasties in Egypt, the very period during which Moses lived. This idea is borne out by the fact that the Pentateuch uses the name “Pharaoh” (Hebrew *phar’oh*, Egyptian *per*-`3) when referring to the king of Egypt. During this time, the term was a generic one referring to the king, similar to referring to the U.S. President as “the White House,” or to the British monarch as “the Crown.” Prior to this time, the name of the king was used, and afterward sources mention the monarch as “Pharaoh X” or “X, king of Egypt”—as in the case of pharaohs Shishak (1 Kings 11:40; 2 Chronicles 12:2) and Neco (2 Kings 23:29).

**The United Monarchy**

David’s existence has been questioned frequently. Examples of petty monarchs ruling miniscule kingdoms in the Near East find rare mention in ancient sources, yet generally their historicity is taken at face value with minimal skepticism. Even Gilgamesh, the hero of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, is thought to have been a historical figure ruling in Mesopotamia between 2600-2700 B.C. based on a reference in the famous Sumerian king list. Yet, David’s historicity is viewed with extreme suspicion, even though there are references to David found in the Tel Dan Inscription and the Moabite Stone, as well as numerous references in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, Gilgamesh is thought to have been a real person despite being the semi-divine hero in a mythical composition, which also includes such fantastic details as a beast-man named Enkidu, a divinely sent creature of destruction called the Bull of Heaven, and a plant that can grant the person who eats it eternal life. David is frequently labeled a myth despite the solid evidence in favor of his existence.

**The Divided Monarchy**

Archaeology has vindicated the Bible’s mention of several figures that were once thought to have been fictional. The existence of Sargon (Isaiah 20:1) was questioned until a relief bearing his image was found in the throne room of his capital city of Dur-Sharrukin (“Fort Sargon”). Belshazzar (Daniel 5:1) was likewise questioned because Babylonian documents listed Nabonidus as the last king of the Babylonian empire. Scholars uncovered ancient evidence showing that Belshazzar co-ruled with his father Nabonidus, ruling from the city while Nabonidus sat for 10 years in self-imposed exile. Additional figures such as Sanballat (the governor of Samaria), Tobiah, Geshem (Nehemiah 2:10), and perhaps even Balaam (Numbers 22-24) have all been located in an extrabiblical source called the Deir ‘Alla Inscription written during this period (Mazar, 1990, p. 330).

**The Life of Christ**

Archaeology does not always mention any one individual, and in the case of Christ, more substantial evidence comes from history rather than archaeology. One significant find is the 1990 discovery of the ossuary (bone box) of Joseph Caiaphas, high priest at the time of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion (John 11:49-53). Jesus is mentioned by the Roman writers Suetonius and Tacitus, the Roman governor Pliny the Younger, and is indirectly referenced by the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata. He is also noted in a Jewish composition from the fifth century called the *Toledoth Jesu*, which gives an alternate explanation for the empty tomb from a hostile source. Jesus is far from the “myth” critics claim Him to be.

**The Early Church**

Inscriptions have revealed the names of numerous individuals mentioned in the New Testament. Gallio, proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12-17), is mentioned in an inscription found at the city of Delphi. Paul’s friend Erastus (Acts 19:22) is likely mentioned in an inscription found at Corinth. Sergius Paulus, mentioned as the first convert on the island of Cyprus, was proconsul (a Roman governor) when the apostle Paul visited the island (Acts 13:7). He is mentioned in an inscription found near Paphos (Reed, 2007, p. 13).

After the evidence is surveyed, it is apparent that much of the criticism of the Bible arises—not from intense scrutiny of the evidence—but from ignorance of it. The overwhelming weight of the archaeological and historical evidence firmly places the Bible in the sphere of reality rather than myth.