

# The Bible as History



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We assume that people throughout human history always studied history, but that's not true. As a matter of fact, if you go back more than a couple of thousand years you'll find people had no interest in history. The first historian in the West is Herodotus, a Greek who lived in the 5th century BCE. And he's given the title: Father of History.

Columbia University historian, Joseph Yerushalmi, who wrote an excellent, highly-praised book called *Zahor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, says that "If Herodotus was the father of history, the father of meaning in history was the Jews." This is a profound idea.

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First, not only were Jews recording history well before Herodotus, but while Herodotus might record the events, the Jews were looking at the deeper meaning, and that deeper meaning can be found most importantly and most significantly within the Bible itself.

The first of these stories that we will examine in the future installments of this series pre-dates Herodotus by about 1,300 years. It is the story of Abraham and it takes place around the 18th century BCE, or 3,700 years ago.

Now don't make the mistake of thinking the Bible is a history book. For example, Abraham, when he appears in the Book of Genesis is already 75 years old. He's one of the most significant figures in Jewish history and the Torah doesn't tell us about him as a child or as a young adult—we pick up his story when he is an old man already.

The Bible is not concerned with giving us all the details of Abraham's life. It is interested only in history as a means of teaching us the important lessons of life—it's

a book of theology in Jewish worldview first and foremost. Therefore, it focuses on the basic information that we need to know.

## HOW ACCURATE IS THE BIBLE?

An article was published recently in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'Aretz*, smashing the Bible, and in the same week, an article was published in *US News and World Report*—a cover story, no less—supporting the accuracy of the Bible vis-a-vis archeology. Why such diametrically opposed views? Because archeology is a very complicated field. So a few words of caution are in order.

The definition of archeology is “the discovery and interpretation of the physical remains of previous civilizations and peoples.” Note that within the definition of archeology is the word “interpretation”. How one archeologist interprets the meaning of a particular find can be very different from how another archeologist interprets the meaning of the same find.

**“The bias of the archeologist is going to affect how he interprets the information.”** Archeology is not a hard science. When an archeologist finds a piece of rock, a vessel, or a piece of a building, he tries to decide what it means. The find has no label on it, unless it's a written document, and even written documents are open to interpretation. So when people make definitive statements about what archeology does or doesn't say, you have to be very careful, because the bias of the archeologist affects how he interprets the information.

As the early books of the Bible are concerned, there is little *direct* evidence for the characters in the Bible. There is, however, a huge amount of *indirect or circumstantial* evidence—names, places, business contracts, marriage contracts, migratory patterns. An enormous amount of information in the Bible has been borne out by archeology.

That is as far as the early books of the Bible are concerned, but once we get to later books, like the Book of Kings, for example, there is excellent direct evidence, written records of other emperors, etc. But the early events exist more or less in a historical vacuum and, unfortunately also in an archeological vacuum.

Keep in mind that the same thing that applies in a court of law applies to archeology: *Lack of evidence is no evidence of lack*. The fact that I haven't found Abraham's camel saddle doesn't mean Abraham didn't have a camel or a saddle. And, indeed, there is a huge amount of circumstantial evidence supporting the basic historicity of the Bible.

Archeology doesn't definitively prove the Bible, and it certainly doesn't discredit it. In fact the more we find, the more we see that there's a tremendous amount of historicity in the text.

In summary, the Bible is not a book of history, yet it contains history and culture, which is more or less borne out by archeology. It's a book of teachings, and it's the ideal way to learn the patterns of history. And if we understand that the reason why we're learning history is to learn lessons, then we have to pay extra special attention to what is going on in the Bible.

## PATTERNS IN JEWISH HISTORY

*The actions of the fathers are assigned to the children. (Nachmanides)*

This is a very famous Jewish saying and Nachmanides was not the only one to say it. What does it mean?

On the microcosmic level, within the stories of Genesis in the Bible, we're going to see that what happens to the ancients will be repeated by their children.

On a macrocosmic level, the personalities and interactions of the early forefathers—the patriarchs and matriarchs—are going to be a model for all of Jewish history, and all of human history. This is why we have to pay extra special attention to what's going on at this early phase of the Bible, because here is where the patterns are set.

**“The Jewish people are arguably the oldest surviving people on the Planet Earth.”** Additionally, we must remember that the Jewish people are arguably the oldest surviving people on the Planet Earth, and because they have been spread out throughout the world, when we learn Jewish history we have to pay attention to all of human history. It's a great framework. To understand Jewish history means to build a great deal of general knowledge of the history of the world at large.

We can't appreciate Jewish history (or the history of any people for that matter) without understanding the larger context in which it takes place.

In the next installment we are going to zoom out and take a macro look at the world into which the first Jew, Abraham, was born.