

Is the Old Testament Historically Reliable?

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Introduction

Maybe it's happened to you before. Perhaps it was watching a special on the History Channel, or in conversation with an unsaved friend, or maybe it was an online article from a respected site, but at some point you came across a well informed source that told you the Bible isn't all it claims to be. Specifically, the Old Testament history you were taught as a kid is not how things really happened and has been disproved by archeology. Liberals who deny the truth of Scripture abound and in a world under the influence of the devil are often given a place of prominence and respect. The truth is, though, that behind all their scholarly-sounding rhetoric, the evidence actually shows that the Bible is a historical document of unparalleled accuracy and integrity. In our study, we will look briefly at the biblical account of Old Testament History. Then we will look at the liberal reimagining of that history. After that, we will look at the evidence and where it points and finally we will conclude with a couple of warnings for believers.

The Biblical Account

Creation to Patriarchs (4,000 – 1876 B.C.)

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth sometime around the year 4,000 B.C. About the year 1,921 B.C. God visits a man named Abram and tells him to go to a land that he has never seen and promises that if Abram obeys then God will make him the father of many nations. Abram, later Abraham, does obey and as a result has a son named Isaac. Isaac has a son named Jacob, whose name is later changed to Israel. Jacob has 12 sons, and one of them is sold into slavery, ends up becoming second in command in Egypt, and about 1876 B.C. leads the entire family into Egypt.

Exodus to United Kingdom (1446 – 970 B.C.)

In Egypt this family grows and grows until it becomes a nation and is eventually enslaved, but after 430 years God charges Moses with the task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. In 1446, Israel marches out of Egypt following incredible miracles performed by God Himself, and in 1406 they enter the long awaited promised land. After three hundred years of judges, Israel demands a king, and in the year 1049 Saul is crowned king of Israel. David later replaces Saul, and builds a massive empire. His son Solomon reigns in his stead, and then Rehoboam his son takes the throne when Solomon dies.

Divided Kingdom to Exile and Beyond (970 – 586 B.C.)

During the reign of Rehoboam, the kingdom of Israel split into two. Ten tribes made Jeroboam king and two stayed loyal to Rehoboam. The northern ten tribes were known as Israel and fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The two southern tribes were known as Judah and fell to Babylon beginning in 605 and culminating in the ultimate defeat of Judah in 586. Later, God allowed the people to return to the land in 538 and under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah they rebuilt the nation as best they could.

The Liberal Reimagining

In the past few hundred years, liberals have come to question the Bible's account of history. They argue that the Scriptures were written much later than they claim to have been written, that they contain contradicting views of God which have been poorly stitched together, and that a careful study of the Old Testament can reveal where these differences lie. Before we look at what liberals actually believe, let's look at what brought them to this point by looking at some of their starting assumptions.

3 Foundational beliefs of liberals

1. **Antisupernaturalism – a disbelief in the miraculous or supernatural.** Liberals begin with the assumption that the miraculous can't happen and that God did not supernaturally speak to or through anyone. The Bible is merely the product of human invention that has some wonderful things to say but also has some problems, much as we would find some truth with Greek philosophers but would also disagree with them on much.
2. **Evolutionary view of religion.** Liberals believe that religions evolved just as they believe animals do. As civilizations progress in science, art, and literature they also progress in their view of the supernatural. The typical pattern would work something like this:

Animism – the belief that certain objects have special manna

Polydemonism – the belief in many supernatural spirits

Polytheism – the elevation of these spirits to the level of a god

Henotheism/Monolatry – the elevation of one god over the rest

Monotheism – the belief in only one god

3. **The place of redactors (editors).** The Old Testament, it is asserted, was written primarily if not exclusively by redactors who took several different sources (often just oral tradition that had been passed down for hundreds of years and may or may not contain some element of truth that had been greatly exaggerated) and combined and synthesized them to create a holy book.

Wellhausen's Reconstruction¹

Julius Wellhausen was the main voice for the liberals when it came to the history of Israel. He wasn't the first, but was the most famous in his attempt to figure out "what really happened." Most of his theories have since been modified or discredited due to archeology, but they nonetheless represent the typical view of Scripture held to by liberals.

1. Early Israel was animistic and believed that natural objects had special powers or manna (Ex. Jacob sleeping on a stone, Abraham sojourning by the terebinth of Moreh and setting up camp near the oaks of Mamre, and Deborah prophesying by a sacred palm tree)
2. Polytheism can be seen with the worship of the golden calf, the bronze serpent, and Jeroboam's golden calves. Later the prophets changed the story to make these look like willful sins.
3. Amos was the first of the writing of prophets. He came up with the idea that there was actually only one God! Others such as Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah bought into this new philosophy and zealously promoted the worship of Yahweh as the only true worship.
4. In discussing these prophets, Lewis Browne claims that they "transformed a jealous demon who roared and belched fire from the crater of a volcano into a transcendent spirit of love. They took a bloody and remorseless protector of a desert people, and without realizing it, changed Him into the merciful Father of all mankind. In fine, they destroyed Yahweh and created God!"²
5. The final step in the evolution of Judaism was the return to the sacrificial system from which the prophets had steered the nation away. Ezra the scribe and the priests under him developed much of the final codified ceremonial and sacrificial rites that we see in Leviticus. The end result was a finished Pentateuch sometime around the year 200 B.C.

¹ This material is a summary of chapters 11 and 12 in Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 2007), 126.

² Lewis Browne, *This Believing World* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 236 quoted in Archer, 126.

The Evidence

These two viewpoints both make confident assertions, so the next step is to look closely at the facts and see which one has the greater amount of evidence. There are two types of evidence that are commonly discussed: external and internal. External evidence is what we find outside of the writings of the Old Testament themselves, mainly archeology. Internal evidence is what we find in the writing of the Old Testament itself that gives us clues as to its author(s) and date of writing.

External Evidence

Many of the arguments that were made by liberals have been silenced as we discover more and more about ancient people. Much archeology has been done since the time of Wellhausen and other critics that contradicts their theories. We will give just a sampling of liberal arguments and their rebuttal.

Argument: *There was no writing at the time of Moses, thus the Pentateuch couldn't have been written until much later.*

Rebuttal: This argument was made because at the time we had no examples of early Semitic writing. We have since found several examples of early writing. Most famously, the Ras Shamra (Ugaritic) Tablets have shown that writing very similar to Hebrew existed and was actually quite common around 1400 B.C.³ Also, the Ebla tablets have shown that even before 2,000 B.C. a phonetic alphabet was being commonly used.⁴ Writing most certainly did exist during the time of Moses.

³ Archer, 141.

⁴ Ibid., 480-481.

Argument: *Comparative religious studies show that religions evolve over time, thus it is natural to conclude this is what happened with Israel.*

Rebuttal: Actually, studies of other religions show the exact opposite. Many early civilizations, such as Egyptian, Asian, and Semitic religions all began with monotheism and later degraded to polytheism. In the ancient city of Ebla, archeologists found written documents from 2,500 – 2,000 B.C. One of the main archeologists on the site, Giovanni Pettinato, states that the civilization began with original monotheism and then degraded to polytheism.⁵

Argument: *The Bible contains many historical references to which we have no actual proof.*

Rebuttal: This fallacy that “We haven’t found it yet so it must not be true!” is all too common and unfortunately embarrassing for liberals. For example, the Bible was once mocked for repeatedly mentioning this “Hittite” civilization that supposedly didn’t exist or was at best a small tribe.⁶ Subsequent archeological discoveries have proved it to be one of the great ancient civilizations. Also, the Bible’s veracity was called into question because it mentioned King Belshazzar in Daniel, and no record of such a king existed. In 1854, the Nabonidus Cylinder was found, which mentioned Belshazzar as the king’s son and co-regent, and Scripture was once again vindicated.

Argument: *There is no way a primitive culture like Israel could have developed advanced system of laws and sacrifices in their early history.*

Rebuttal: Again, recent archeology has shown just the opposite. The Code of Hammurabi, an 18th century document from Babylon, contains many laws that are very similar to what we see in Exodus, Leviticus, and

⁵ Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla: An Empire Inscribed in Clay* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981), 244.

⁶ Francis Newman, *A History of the Hebrew Monarchy from the Administration of Samuel to the Babylonish Captivity*, 2nd edition (London: John Chapman, 1853), 179 note 2. Available online at <http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/francis-william-newman/a-history-of-the-hebrew-monarchy-mwe.shtml>

Numbers. Also, the Ras Shamra Tablets mentioned earlier use many similar technical terms for sacrifice. Don't forget, Israel lived in Egypt (the most advanced civilization in the world at the time) for over four hundred years before heading out into the desert. Yale scholar Millar Burrows states "Scholars have sometimes supposed that the social and moral level of the laws attributed to Moses was too high for such an early age. The standards represented by ancient law codes of the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites, as well as the high ideals found in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and the early wisdom literature of the Egyptians, have effectively refuted this assumption."⁷

Internal Evidence

Argument: *Different names of God point to different sources that were combined into one.*

Rebuttal: Liberals point to different names for God (*Elohim/God* vs. *Yahweh/Lord*) as evidence that there were multiple sources combined into one. But variation is the mark of good writing, not of multiple authors. Many other religious documents such as the contemporary Canaanite religious texts as well as more recent documents such as the Koran also use multiple names for their god(s).

Argument: *"Doublets" prove that multiple sources were combined into one.*

Rebuttal: Liberals will attempt to point to supposed discrepancies, such as Joseph being sold to the Midianites and the Ishmaelites in the same passage, the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, or the two occasions of Abraham passing off his wife as his sister as proof that there were originally two stories. However, no actual evidence supports this. If one begins with the assumption that the Bible is just a bunch of oral myths, it would be possible for the same story to change enough that it existed in two forms and was recorded as two different accounts.

⁷ Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones?* (Ne Haven, Conn.: ASOR, 1941), 56, quoted in Archer, 146.

If it was recorded history, this wouldn't make sense. In this case, one's starting assumption will determine their conclusion. Since the Bible has been proven to be surprisingly accurate historically, it would seem most logical to assume that it is written history and not written down oral traditions that morphed after centuries of retelling.

Argument: *Different writing styles and topics in the same book prove different authors.*

Rebuttal: The classic example of this is the book of Isaiah. The first half of the book contains many warnings for Judah and the nations around her. In the second half of the book, the tone changes completely to one of hope and encouragement for the people of Israel. Liberal scholars thus assume that there must be two different authors. However, there is no external evidence whatsoever for this claim. Many authors write books whose tone change dramatically as they cover related yet different topics. This doesn't prove there are multiple authors.

With all of these, the major flaw is subjectivity. The theories over what we can tell about the origin of a document based on the document itself is constantly in flux because there is no objective way to do this kind of research. For example, Welhausen himself once stated "About the origin of Deuteronomy there is still less dispute; in all circles where appreciation of scientific results can be looked for at all, it is recognized that it was composed in the same age in which it was discovered [by King Josiah in his reforms]." However modern liberals now put the book later or earlier, but never during the reign of Josiah.⁸

Conclusion

Both external and internal evidence confirm the Old Testament to be a genuine historical document of the highest caliber, not a later fabrication of myths based loosely on oral tradition and personal agendas. So how do such brilliant men get it so wrong?

⁸ Archer, 86.

Liberals make the same mistake evolutionists do. They set out to be objective and scientific in their study. But they make the critical mistake of equating materialism with science. So they reject anything supernatural out of hand, not because of historical evidence, but because they refuse to accept anything that contradicts their worldview. The ironic result is that they end up becoming anything but scientific. Their refusal to accept the most simple and logical possibility – that the Bible is what it claims to be – means that they must instead make up alternatives. The result is a loss of objectivity and a rise in subjective speculation. Theories multiply and critics find it impossible to agree, because they are not doing real historical research; they are simply approaching the Bible looking for ways to pick it apart and show what *really* happened, a method not taken with any other historical document, even though the Bible is the best attested and most carefully preserved ancient document we have.

But God already warned this would happen. In Romans 1, Paul tells us that the result for those who reject their Creator will be that “Professing themselves to be wise, they will become fools.” When the truth about God is rejected out of hand the only option left is error. And those who insist on error we call fools, regardless of their intellect.

The Warnings

1. Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing

Christ warned us that the enemy rarely looks like the enemy. Opponents of the gospel love to make us think we are one of them. Simply because a writer claims to be reverent towards the Bible doesn’t necessarily mean they believe it. Take for example the following statement:

*Devoted as I am to modern biblical scholarship, and insistent as I am on its importance, I should want to state as emphatically as I can that biblical scholarship is not nearly as important as the Bible itself.*⁹

While that may sound like a wonderfully pious thing to say, a closer examination of the book will reveal that it is a hollow compliment. For example, later in the book the author states

*The Book of Isaiah consists of at least the original Isaiah (and interpolations); a writer, unknown by name, but called Second Isaiah (and interpolations); and a third writer, or group of writers, often called Third or Trito-Isaiah.*¹⁰

*At any rate, we have a terminal date of 250 B.C. for canonization of Part One [Pentateuch], and convenient date, A.D. 90, for Part Three, the Kesuvim [Writings]. For the date of Part Two, Neviim ("Prophets"), we have scarcely more than reasonable guesses, and the period around 100 B.C. can be offered.*¹¹

Or consider the following from *The Bible through the Ages*, which is put out by Reader's Digest:

*It is now recognized that reverent and critical study of the language of the Bible, its thought, and its background can only lead to a fuller understanding of its essential message.*¹²

But what is meant by this phrase? Well, if we put this sentence in context, the meaning becomes chillingly clear. Here is what led up to the phrase:

⁹ Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York: Knopf, 1963), xv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² Metzger, Bruce. Introduction. *The Bible through the Ages*. (Pleasantville: Reader's Digest Association, 1996), 12.

At times reverence for the Bible has been carried to such a point that any critical study of its books was frowned upon. But when it is found that some traditional views of the authorship and the date of certain books have been ill-grounded, it is not irreverent to seek for another interpretation that will do full justice to the facts of Scripture.

By such methods several traditional opinions have been virtually overthrown; for example, the Pentateuch is no longer attributed to the personal authorship of Moses but ascribed to a much later period in the history of Israel (probably the ninth through the fifth century B.C.). In the New Testament the differences in historical value between the Gospel According to John and the other three, synoptic, Gospels are generally acknowledged.

Believers must realize that liberal scholars try to make it look like they believe the same thing we do, but the truth is they are false prophets who will spend a Christless eternity in hell if they don't repent.

2. Compromising Brothers

The other danger to be aware of is evangelical scholars who make concessions to liberals in an attempt to gain credibility in their eyes. When evangelicals split away from Fundamentalism, one of their goals was to be more scholarly. While there is nothing wrong with carefully studying and defending the Bible, too often this becomes a little more than an attempt to gain the approval of unbelievers. The result is that they make dangerous concessions in an attempt to seem credible, to the point where they put great strains on the key doctrine of inerrancy.

For example the ESV study Bible, which can be very helpful at times, contains an essay on the date of the Exodus. There is a debate over whether Israel left Egypt in the 1446 B.C. or around 1260. Typically, Bible believing Christians have held to an early date, but liberals argue for a late date. Here is a summary of the article in the ESV study Bible.¹³

¹³ "The Date of the Exodus" ESV Study Bible (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 33.

Arguments for the Early Date	Arguments for the Late Date
1. The Bible tells us in 1 Kings 6:1 that Solomon’s temple was built 480 years after Israel left Egypt	1. Archeology tells us there is no record of several cities the Israelites built in Egypt until the 1200’s
2. The Bible tells us in Judges 11:26 that 300 years took place between the Exodus and Jephthah	2. 1 Kings uses 480 to mean 12 generations, which actually only covered 300 years
3. Some archeology points to the destruction of Jericho around 1400 B.C.	3. There is no record of a battle between Israel and Egypt until 1210, even though Egypt had much control of Canaan
4. Several letters from Canaan ask for Egypt’s help with invaders around 1400 B.C.	4. The Bible does not contain any battles between Egypt and Israel in Joshua or Judges
5. The building of Raamses couldn’t be in 1270 because this was before Moses was born	5. The covenant forms used at the time of Moses parallel the 13 th century, not the 15 th
6. For the chronology of the Judges to be right, Israel had to be in Canaan for 350 years before the kings, not 170.	6. Archeology shows complete destruction of certain cities in the later 13 th century.

A careful examination of these arguments makes it clear that arguments for the early date rest on direct Scriptural statements, while arguments for the late date are based on archeology. For this reason, almost all conservative scholars use to hold exclusively to an early date. But the ESV concludes the article by stating, “Both the early date and the late date are supported by established evangelical scholars today. In this Study Bible, both the early date (1446 B.C.) and the later date (c. 1260) are included.” Believers must realize that while study Bibles and other resources written by good Christian scholars can be helpful, they should always practice discernment when using tools made by flawed people.