

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND APOLOGETICS

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Apologetics, broadly defined as defending the truth of Christianity as it is deposited in the 66 books of the Bible, is a multi-faceted task. Apologetics can involve personal testimony, philosophy, historical arguments, rhetorical persuasion, and a vast array of other subjects. Since God is the creator and sustainer of all that exists, and His divine nature and eternal power are clearly perceived in all of creation (Rom 1, Ps 19), an apologetic for the God of the Bible can be employed in literally every circumstance of human life.

Archaeology is often referred to as both an art and a science. A “science” because it involves the rigorous identification, excavation, measurement, drawing, photographing, and analysis of the remains of human activity from the past. It is an “art” because material remains of the past do not and cannot “speak” for themselves. Even the meaning of written records from the past are often highly disputed. Archaeological evidence is limited in its scope, providing us with a “slice” of the past. A helpful and informative slice to be sure, but only a slice.

Archaeological remains are interpreted in various “layers,” if you will pardon the pun. What do I mean by this? First, there is the most immediate interpretation in the 5 meter by 5 meter archaeological square. Then, that square is contextualized by other squares. For example, how does the evidence in square AF 27 at Shiloh fit with square AF 26? And so on. Then, how are we to understand the ancient human occupation of the site of Shiloh in a broader sense, and over a period of time?

But then even larger questions arise. Who lived there, and when? What did they believe? How did they live? Does the archaeological evidence “tell” us? If the evidence is adequate in its volume and specificity, it can point us in a certain direction. But for the most part, the archaeological evidence cannot answer these questions. However, the Bible does tell us who lived at Shiloh, exactly when they lived there, and how they arrived there. Very specifically, in fact. As such, the Bible immediately brings in additional “layers” of interpretation into the discussion. How an archaeologist/interpreter views the origin, nature, canonization, preservation, transmission, and translation of the Bible will significantly impact what he/she believes the evidence at Shiloh “tells” us. Additionally, while most secular archaeologists will vehemently deny it, personal and prior worldview commitments will invariably and deeply influence these various layers of interpretation. It is the task of the Christian apologist to draw these commitments out into the open so that their incoherence and irrationality might be demonstrated so that the hearer might be drawn to the truth of the Gospel.

Another way to think about the relationship between archaeology and apologetics is to envision a battle scenario. The Bible tells us there is a spiritual battle taking place in the world between the Truth of God as revealed in the Bible vs. a vast array of philosophies and religions originating in the fallen mind of sinful man. In a battle of this nature, forces are and must be employed at every level. To use an analogy from Cornelius Van Til, evidence from the fields of science, history and archaeology serve as infantry. They are the “ground troops” who engage in spiritual and intellectual combat at the microlevel.

Take for instance ABR’s 50+ years of archaeological research on the Conquest narratives of Joshua. Our staff has engaged in an infantry battle at the microlevel about pottery, architecture, carbon-14 dating, geography, biblical exegesis, and so on. This work has principally involved the Conquest cities of Jericho, Ai, and Hazor, but has also extended more broadly to Exodus-Joshua-Judges. Given the onslaught against the book of Joshua from the world of archaeology and secular (and even “Christian”!) scholarship, an “infantry” response by the ABR ministry has indeed been necessary. Grinding out the nitty-gritty details about pottery, etc. was required, since that is where the assault against the Bible was/is being waged.



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**Bryant Wood by the fallen walls of Jericho.** His well-known argument that the evidence from Tell es-Sultan supports the biblical timeline for Joshua’s conquest appeals to pottery, stratigraphy, and scarabs. Nevertheless, the Jericho debate remains fiercely controversial because such physical data are subjected to almost endless interpretations.



**Right: One of the archaeological squares at the 2018 excavations of Shiloh.** While archaeological findings give us only certain types of information, they often come to us in incredible forms. The archaeological square pictured here yielded ancient pottery, coins, and jewelry. These artifacts can be dated to help us recreate the history of Shiloh's occupation. Included was a jar handle still bearing the millennia old fingerprint of the original potter.



Steve Andrews

And while the nitty gritty is essential when dealing with subjects like the destruction of Jericho, it is insufficient in and of itself. Larger, paradigmatic questions immediately come to bear on the question of Jericho's destruction. For instance, archaeologists often claim that the account in Joshua 6 was written centuries after the time which the Bible places the destruction of the city (*ca.* 1406 BC). If it was written centuries later, such correlations are not theoretically possible. Correlating the account with archaeological evidence is, in effect, a fool's errand. In other words, the archaeologist's previous commitment to a certain paradigm (a "layer" which I spoke about above) about the nature and time of the Bible's origin has led to a dismissal of Dr. Bryant Wood's detailed analysis of the pottery and other evidence. Instead of closely examining their own larger worldview commitments, our opponents dismiss Dr. Wood's work as so much fundamentalist banter.

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Let us think about another example, the prophecies in the book of Daniel. Daniel lived in Babylon in the 6th century BC, and writes about future world kingdoms such as Persia, Greece, and Rome. This involves "seeing" the future. But since modern scientists and philosophers "know" that no one can see the future, and we "know" that "god" (whoever he or she may be) cannot see the future, Daniel must have written his prophecies in Israel in the 2nd century BC instead. Here, the conflict is not about the evidence, but about what modern scholars believe about the nature of God and how He relates to history and reality. Ultimately, the debate has little to do with the microlevel textual and archaeological evidence that strongly supports Daniel's 6th century BC authorship.

While thinking about writing this article, I was reminded of a scene from the science fiction series *Star Trek*. Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott chides one of his underlings in his infamous Scottish accent: "How many times do I have to tell you—the right tool for the right job!" Like Mr. Scott's admonition to use the right tool, we must recognize that that tool of archaeology cannot be employed to deal with larger worldview and philosophical conflicts. It is not designed for that task. Instead, archaeology can

serve as a powerful instrument in the toolbelt of the Christian apologist. In that sense, it is "the right tool for the right job."

This is the reason why ABR's Ministry Description reads (in part) as follows:

ABR's teaching ministries include:

1. In-depth textual, cultural, and historical analysis of biblical accounts.
2. Conducting original field research, including archaeological excavations to determine the location of specific biblical sites and events, especially sites dismissed as folk legends by the world of critical scholarship. ABR addresses critical scholarship in the realms of science, theology, and biblical studies, establishing the factual and historical truth of Scripture.
3. The Staff and Associates of ABR provide critical analysis of fieldwork, research, and popular media produced for both the scholarly community and for dissemination to the general public. ABR corrects erroneous interpretations of data and the false conclusions associated with such interpretations through sound scientific and research practices and procedures. This includes identification of logical fallacies, errors of fact, and the tearing down of any argument raised up against the knowledge of the truth.
4. ABR seeks to resolve apparent conflicts between the findings of archaeology and science, and the Bible.
5. ABR combines presuppositional and evidential apologetics to dynamically reach the post-modern mind. The Bible is inspired of God, and as God's written revelation it is the ultimate source of truth about God and His creation. Scripture is the foundation and guide in interpreting all other historical data including sources of evidence that support the reliability of the Bible.

Allow me to draw your attention to point number five. The use of presuppositional apologetics is another way of saying that ABR recognizes microlevel arguments about evidence are ultimately





Michael C. Ludden

An aerial view of the Shiloh excavation squares. These are the 5 meter by 5 meter battlefields in which the microlevel warfare of apologetics is waged.

insufficient. The big philosophical/paradigmatic questions always control how evidence is interpreted. Peter Gentry and John Meade state the matter this way:

“The constant and ceaseless quest of the human mind to impose meaningful organization on the input provided is known in cognitive psychology as the *Gestalt* effect and is a fundamental feature of human life. No observer is objective. Let us remember that the raw data are *not* self-interpreting. Each human brings to the data a metanarrative as the mind seeks to assemble all the data and order them into a cohesive and meaningful whole.”<sup>1</sup>

Presuppositional apologetics deals with confronting false metanarratives, those belief systems which cannot coherently place the data into a whole. Meanwhile, evidential apologetics deals with the actual data itself. Then, if that data is correctly understood, it can be carefully integrated with the biblical metanarrative.

In over 15 years of ministry with ABR, I have found that most apologetic encounters involve weaving in and out between the two arenas. Talk of evidence/data (i.e. Jericho pottery) usually brings up much larger philosophical matters (like the canard, “God commanded Joshua to commit genocide!”). The Christian must be prepared to engage at both levels.

**“The Bible tells us there is a spiritual battle taking place in the world between the Truth of God as revealed in the Bible and the philosophies and religions originating in the fallen mind of sinful man.”**

In closing, allow me to encourage you to never give up the sure foundation of biblical revelation in your apologetic encounter. Once you give up your only sure ground, the unbeliever will inevitably try to interpret the data in terms of his or her own paradigm/metanarrative (Prv 26:4). One step might involve pointing out the incoherence of your opponent’s presuppositions (Prv 26:5). Then, Lord willing, explain how the archaeological data under dispute can only be coherently interpreted in the Christian paradigm, where Truth and eternal life can be found.

Archaeology... to the Glory of God!

## References

Peter J. Gentry and John D. Meade, “*MasPsa and the Early History of the Hebrew Psalter*,” in *From Scribal Error to Rewriting: How Ancient Texts Could and Could Not Be Changed*, ed. Anneli Aejmelaus, Drew Longacre, and Natia Mirotadze, *De Septuaginta Investigationes* 12 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 113.



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