

EDITORIAL

WHY . . .

The appearance of the Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology is a further recognition of the importance of archaeology for Scripture Studies. More and more the biblical scholar is resorting to the findings of archaeology. This can put us at a disadvantage, at a loss to know what is its proper place and how to assess its value.

Fortunately we have outlived the once common view, encouraged by popular books on the subject, that archaeology serves the Bible by proving it to be true. Archaeology may have a limited apologetic value, but to me it seems impertinent to look to such an earthy science to *prove the truth* of God's Word. However, it can help considerably in pointing out *wherein* the Bible is true, what the author intends to teach, as distinct from the means he used. The assistance afforded to biblical studies by Archaeology might be summarised under the following headings:—

1. Literary finds. (a) discovery of biblical texts.
 (b) knowledge of Hebrew and other Semitic languages.
 (c) acquaintance with ancient literary forms and usages.
 (d) awareness of the thought background of canonical writings.
2. Clarification of historical details in the Bible.
3. Reconstruction of the social and historical conditions under which the books were written.

It is clear that we have in archaeology a valuable means of studying the inspired text, yet it is one which needs to be used with care. It is imperative to be aware of its limitations and to know how to control the evidence. A fatal mistake is to regard an excavation report as enjoying an inerrancy equal to that of the Bible. It is only in the last two decades that the discipline has reached anything like the certainty of a true science and, even now, some of the current excavations in Palestine are guilty of capital sins. Yet the data unearthed is too valuable for us to follow the temptation of throwing out the baby with the bath water. We simply have to be critical as in any other field and know how to distinguish the certain from the uncertain.

It would be useful at this stage to trace the history of excavation in Palestine. Until 1890, archaeology was no better than pious treasure-hunting: Warren was digging tunnels through the Jerusalem underground and de Saulcy clearing out the Tomb of the Kings as if it were a sewer. If anything of interest was found there was no hope of dating it. The valuable work of this period was the exploration and mapping of the Holy Land. In 1890 Flinders Petrie began his work. He recognised that a mound or *tell* is an accumulation of one ruined city overlying another. In the life span of a city it was constantly destroyed and rebuilt, so that gradually it formed a distinctively shaped mound within which each phase of the city's life is left as a thin layer of clay, soil or ash. As one digs down it is like reading pages in the history of the city, but of course, backwards in true Semitic fashion. Petrie discovered a second fundamental principle, viz., that each period had its own distinctive pottery, and that sherds found in different occupation levels could be used to establish the relative chronology of those levels. When he recognised, together with particular styles of pottery, objects datable from associated inscriptional material in Egyptian tombs and temples, absolute dating became possible. Now, an expert picking up a sherd can generally date it to within a half century, and consequently the whole stratum from which it came. Petrie and his followers did not immediately realise the full implications of his new found principles. They thought it was sufficient to remove horizontal layers of fixed depth, say 50 cm. As we will see presently, this could occasion the mixing of objects from several periods, and consequently an inaccurate dating of finds. At the same time there was an exaggerated emphasis on architecture, all the material found within a building being dated with the building while ignoring the stratigraphic relationship between buildings. This procedure vitiated almost all excavation up to 1948, including classic digs like Megiddo, Gezer, Beisan and a host of others. It's still being carried on in some campaigns.

It is to the glory of British archaeologists to have recognised that occupation levels are laid down like geological strata, that is, in an irregular fashion according to the lie of the land, and that they can be abruptly disturbed by later human activities or natural catastrophes (e.g., pits, earthquakes). Hence the first task is to plot the geological history of the site, noting scrupulously every change of soil, isolating each strip of homogeneous soil no matter how much it dips and rises, and labelling the finds accordingly. Subsequent study will show that a number of these levels belong to a single period and they will be grouped as a phase. Only after phasing the site and its occupational remains is the archaeologist in a position to view the human history of the site. But the

geological history is the key to the human history, and for this reason the archaeologist pays close attention to the shape and succession of soil changes on the vertical face of his trench or baulk. A plan of this vertical face will be carefully drawn and eventually published in the report. Baulks will criss-cross through the excavation area and if a wall is being uncovered baulks will be left at right angles to the wall—because it is on the vertical face of the baulk that is written the geological history of the site.

I have gone into so much detail on this point to bring out, clearly I hope, the difference between good and bad digging. As scientists you must know how much credence you can put on the evidence you use. If you need to resort to archaeological evidence, you will know, of course, not to take it from popular works, Readers' Digest and the like, but you may be over-awed by the evidence you find in weighty excavation reports. Yet it is not every excavation report that can be taken as Gospel truth. A useful criterion is to check the plans published in the report to see if the campaign was conducted according to the strictest principles of stratigraphy. It does not mean that all other work is to be dismissed as uncertain. It depends on your purpose. If you are interested in an architectural feature, e.g., a temple, stratigraphy is not so important. But if you are wanting an accurate dating of the temple, or if you wish to know what kind of safety pin was in use in the year 1156 B.C., only a properly stratigraphic dig can be relied on.

An archaeologist not only reports facts as he finds them, he must also interpret them. Interpretation can be highly subjective and you need to assess it critically. Scholars are only human and we must be ready to make allowance for personal factors. A man with a pet theory will seize on the slightest evidence which he thinks will support his theory. A real menace is the religious man who excavates "with Bible in hand"—this is bad for the digging and bad for the Bible. Antipathy towards a fellow archaeologist or a domestic problem can colour his judgment. However, unless we know the man personally these are factors we cannot control while using his opinion. and certainly for the most part we can be confident that archaeologists will approach the task of interpretation as objectively and scientifically as possible. There is one form of subjectivity which is inevitable from the nature of the discipline. Often there are missing links in a line of argument—a scientist can see evidence pointing to a certain conclusion, but a vital piece of evidence is not available. Hence on the strength of an intuition, A is said to *suggest* B. We should not despise a learned intuition but as critical scholars using the conclusion we must be aware how big a gap is bridged by that "suggest", and

how many “probables” are in the chain of argument.

I have been trying to stress that, while archaeology has immense value for Sacred Scripture, it has severe limitations arising from its nature and history, and its evidence needs critical evaluation when applied to the Bible.

In the realisation, then, both of the advantages and of the disadvantages of Biblical archaeology, we offer you this journal for your critical appraisal and (we hope) enjoyment. A special word of thanks is due to the contributors, who could be pardoned for thinking that they were risking their scholarly efforts on an uncertain starter. Their offerings have proved agreeably varied and original. May we invite contributions to future issues of this journal, correspondence disagreeing or commenting on questions raised on this issue, and even short notes.

The Editor