

A New Paradigm for Biblical Archaeology Myths, Models and Mission

by Steven Ortiz

The popular view of archaeology is a swashbuckling hero fighting off demons with a whip and making phenomenal discoveries such as the Ark of the Covenant. This is a modern-day Hollywood myth of what archaeologists do. Truth be told, when amateurs attempt to do biblical archaeology, they mimic the Hollywood myth. Unfortunately, the church has become mesmerized with the sensationalism and hype of this type of Hollywood caricature. Archaeology is a labor-intensive discipline. It requires a lot of time and money. Archaeologists labor in the heat every dig season, away from their families. Countless hours are spent in the field, lab and library doing research. Students entering our archaeology program must have a passion and calling for the discipline, or they will not be able to run this race.

In the previous generation, biblical archaeology was a subdiscipline of biblical studies, sometimes found in departments of biblical backgrounds. Seminary students took a biblical backgrounds course that covered history, culture and geography of Bible Lands. Today, archaeology is a mature discipline with subsets of biblical archaeology, Near Eastern archaeology, archaeology of the Levant, Egyptology, epigraphy, etc. Just as students in biblical studies study the ancient languages of Hebrew and Greek in order to be equipped to study the texts, students in archaeology do the same, with the exception that their texts and languages are material culture (e.g., pottery, rocks and dirt). Students need to touch and interact with the remnants of the ancient past. They need to be handling pottery, studying stratigraphy and chronology. Most of all, they need to travel to Bible Lands and get their hands dirty in field excavation. The model of teaching archaeology needs to change in order for our students to be leaders and scholars in the field of biblical archaeology.

I am frequently asked what archaeology has to do with a theological education. How does this serve the church? Train students for ministry? Do archaeology classes have a place in the curriculum of theological education? YES! Christianity is a faith based on events, not a belief in a set of propositions (although we normally articulate our theological viewpoints as such). Every major doctrine of the Christian faith is revealed in the context of an event or action: Sin, Redemption, Incarnation, Atonement and Salvation, just to name a few. It is a faith based on the actions of God in a space-time continuum. God created, He called Abraham, He delivered His children from Egypt, He raised up prophets and He sent His son to die on a cross. Even the claim to be born again is a space-time event! The heart of evangelism and missions is not about changing a person's perceptions of Christianity, but about changing his heart. It is an event.

Our new program is unique in that it teaches students to place the Bible within its historical and cultural context. Recent debates in popular culture such as *The DaVinci Code*, *The Lost Gospels* and *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* illustrate the attraction and influence of the historical background of the Bible. While these recent publications are based on poor scholarship, it is the bad theology that undermines Orthodox faith. The church, like the larger society, is easily manipulated by the Hollywood caricatures due to biblical and historical illiteracy.

Our mission is to (1) conduct archaeological research, (2) train students in the disciplines of archaeology and biblical studies and (3) study the Bible in its historical context. Today biblical archaeology is dominated by characters, charlatans and critics. The future needs to see an archaeology program that takes the Bible seriously and takes archaeology seriously. Today, the future has arrived at Lipscomb.