



Aim of lesson

The powerful message of the Bible will seem unimportant if - as many do - we regard events as a series of myths. Finding historical evidence that the events really did happen can only strengthen our trust in it.

Preparation required

You will need to decide how much material you are going to cover. You may have favourite examples of your own or you could familiarise yourself with those mentioned here. The following examples cover a broad period of time. If you use your own examples make sure the students realise that there is actually masses of archaeological discovery to support the accuracy of the Bible.

The internet and a lot of books have very good photos of archeological specimens which you might like to assemble before the lesson. 'Treasures from Bible Times' by Alan Millard is a good example.

Outline of lesson

Every time the Bible includes any fact about a person, a date, a place or an event, it is telling us that this is a real book about real people; and when evidence is discovered that enables us to check that fact it means that the truth of the Bible can be checked. The remarkable thing is that there is so much evidence that the accounts of events in the Bible are true.

There have always been sceptics and continue to be plenty of them, but when the Bible accounts of events are echoed in other sources, this encourages us in our belief that the Bible is not just 'another book' but a message from God which amongst other things, tells us about our future and the kingdom to come.

So we should be inspired to read and understand more of the Bible, having been assured that in so many details its accuracy has been confirmed.

The examples that follow cover well over 1000 years, from the time of Abraham to the end of the kingdom of Israel.

Abraham's city 20th century BC

Genesis 11 and 12 tell us how God asked Abram to leave Ur and go to a land he didn't know of.

Ur was first discovered because the archaeologists believed the Bible and knew it would be there. One of the pictures in the students' books show firstly that there was a lot of wealth in Ur. Maybe that is one reason God didn't want Abram to stay there. Another shows that there was a ziggurat much like the tower of Babel might have been.

Passing children through the fire to Molech

This appalling practice is spoken about in many places in the Bible, and the children of Israel were repeatedly warned against becoming involved in this evil ritual. In Leviticus 18:21 and 21:2-6 God tells the people not to sacrifice any of their children to Molech, but 2 Kings 21:6 describes how the evil king Manasseh made his own son 'pass through the fire'.

Archaeologists have found evidence of infant sacrifice in a people who lived in Carthage and elsewhere called the 'Punic' people. Their practice was to sacrifice babies by burning them on a pyre and then burying their ashes in an urn. The urns which have been discovered had inscriptions on them giving the name of the baby, the name of the father and a note saying that the child had been consecrated to the heathen god.

These urns were buried together in a place called a 'Topheth'.

It is clear that such a 'Topheth' existed outside Jerusalem in the Vale of Hinnom, and there is little reason to doubt that this type of human sacrifice was practised widely among the heathen nations, as well as being adopted as part of the idolatrous worship of Israel and Judah at times in their history. This practice was stopped during the reign of the faithful King Josiah. We read in 2 Kings 23:10 that he desecrated Topheth, which is in the valley of Hinnom so that no one could use it to sacrifice his son or his daughter.

What is the significance of this? The Bible speaks of the horror of infant sacrifice and the archaeologists have confirmed that such practices went on in those days. They have even confirmed that the word 'Topheth' which appears in the Biblical record, is specific to a cemetery for those unfortunates.

The burning and re-building of Hazor – 13th century BC

Hazor was one of the cities that was taken by Joshua as he led the Israelites in the conquest of the land. There is a small detail in the record, mentioned just in passing, (Joshua 11:11) that says that Joshua 'burnt Hazor with fire,' and it is very interesting

to know that the archaeologists (under Yigal Yadin) have found evidence of mass and violent destruction of the city by fire during the 13th century BC, which is the time of the invasion by Joshua. The ash in some places was 3 feet deep!

Further, there was evidence of mutilation of the Canaanite and Egyptian deities found at the site, which discounts both the Canaanites and Egyptians as the destroyers of this city – and therefore suggests that the early Israelites could have been the aggressors in this case.

Solomon's royal cities, 10th century BC

In the reign of King Solomon, we read in 1 Kings 9:15 that he built Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer. These three cities are specifically mentioned as being part of a huge building plan originated by King Solomon. The archaeologist Yigal Yadin spent years at the three sites and eventually found identical six-chambered gates at all three cities and these have been dated to the 10th century BC. The fact that they are all identical and were built at this time is clear evidence of Solomon's handiwork, which agrees with the Biblical record that King Solomon built them.

The Moabite stone – 9th century BC

In 2 Kings 3:4-5 we read that Mesha the King of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel. Mesha had been expected to pay tribute to the Israelite king Omri and then to Ahab his son after him, but after the death of Ahab, Mesha rebelled.

The Mesha stele, or Moabite Stone, was discovered in 1868 in Dibon by a German missionary. It is made of black basalt and measures approximately 4ft x 2 ft. The inscription is written in the Moabite language. On it Mesha records his rebellion and subsequent victories against the king of Israel, a son of king Omri; he refers to the name of the LORD, 'YaHWeH'; and to the Moabite god Chemosh.

Why should this be so interesting to a Bible reader? Well, Mesha obviously had no interest in confirming the truth of the Bible and yet he has confirmed

- that there was a King called Omri - 1 Kings 16:23-27,
- that he (Mesha) rebelled against a son of Omri (note that a son can mean son or descendant and sees to refer to Jehoram, a grandson of Omri) - 2 Kings 3:4-5,
- that there was a god of the Moabites called Chemosh - 1 Kings 11:7, and
- that the name YaHWeH was commonly known at the time - Exodus 3:15.

Hezekiah's tunnel – BC 700

King Hezekiah, king of Judah, ruled in Jerusalem at a time when the Assyrian power was growing.

In order to strengthen the city against an impending attack by the Assyrians, Hezekiah devised a way of bringing water into the city of Jerusalem by making a tunnel from a spring (called Gihon) just outside the wall on the east side of the city, right into the city, ending at the Pool of Siloam. Now, in the event of a siege the people would not run out of water. See 2 Chronicles 32:30 and 2 Kings 20:20.

The tunnel that was eventually built is an amazing feat of engineering! Even today engineers do not know how two sets of workers working from the two ends of the tunnel, working through solid rock for a total length of 530 metres, finally met up! But the tunnel is still there and you can sometimes walk through it, touching the work of the men who centuries ago chipped away at the solid rock, to bring water into the city. You can even see where the two teams of men had to slightly their course in order to meet up and complete the tunnel.

In 1880 another discovery was found relating to the tunnel. It was an inscription which was discovered by a boy who was bathing in the Gihon Spring. The inscription was carved in the rock at the end of the tunnel and it described the meeting of the two groups of workers - the translation is in the students' books. Israeli scientists have used carbon dating and other dating methods involving uranium to investigate remains found in the tunnel and they have confirmed that the tunnel was built in approximately 700 BC which agrees with the Biblical record of this happening in the reign of King Hezekiah.

Today the tunnel is a testament to truthfulness of the Biblical record. The detail given in the Bible is only very scant and yet the tunnel has been found. It makes us think that when these simple details are given and yet are found to be accurate, then the rest of the writings in the Bible can also be relied upon as truth.

Sennacherib's invasion BC 700

In 2 Kings 18 and 19 we read about the invasion of the kingdom of Judah by Sennacherib king of Assyria. The record tells us that the city of Jerusalem was surrounded and Hezekiah in despair went into the temple of the Lord and appealed to him for help. In reply, the Lord sent his prophet Isaiah with a message that the Assyrians would be defeated. That same night (2 Kings 19:35) an angel of the Lord went out and killed 185,000 men of the Assyrian army so Sennacherib withdrew what was left of his army and returned to his capital at Nineveh.

Sennacherib's own record of this event is recorded on the 'Taylor Prism' in the British Museum. It is a record of Sennacherib's campaigns and was found at Nineveh. In it Sennacherib records how he came against the cities of Judah and he gives great detail about how he besieged and took them. However when it comes to his record of his campaign against Jerusalem the detail he gives is significantly different. He speaks of King Hezekiah – 'himself like a caged bird, I shut up in Jerusalem his royal city' – but there is no mention of taking the city. He correctly records that he surrounded the city but there is no triumph.

So why did he not complete the story? We would not expect an Assyrian King to admit that a huge part of his army was destroyed by the God of his enemy! But King Sennacherib is generally regarded as an accurate historian and what he does record is indeed accurate - he simply misses out the bad bits.

Interestingly, a mass grave of 1500 Assyrian soldiers has been found at Lachish. No doubt there are many others that have not been found.

So again the details in the Bible are confirmed by archaeology. King Sennacherib did invade the land of Judah and took many cities. The one city he does not mention as having taken is Jerusalem, and this is the city which according to the Bible, was saved from destruction by the angel of the Lord.

Recent news

'Tiny tablet provides proof for Old Testament' (Daily Telegraph, 11 July 2007)

In Jeremiah 39:3 is a list of names of all the officials of the king of Babylon, who came and took seats in the Middle Gate. The names are given as (in the NIV): Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar, Nebo-Sarsekim a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officials of the king of Babylon. Other translations represent the names differently, but it is 'Nebo-Sarsekim a chief officer' who is the subject of this piece of news.

A visiting professor to the British museum, Prof Michael Jursa, from Vienna, was examining one of the 130,000 Assyrian cuneiform tablets in the museum and found a name which he recognised. (Cuneiform is picture writing, used in the period 3200 BC to the second century AD. It was created by pressing an instrument, usually a reed, into wet clay which then hardened.)

The name was 'Nabu-Sharrussu-ukin' and he was described as 'the chief eunuch' of Nebuchadnezzar 2nd, King of Babylon. The tablet itself was dated to the 10th year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (BC 595), 12 years before the siege of Jerusalem.

Although the spelling of the name is different, the names are undoubtedly the same and the experts are in agreement that this is one and the same person. This seemingly insignificant discovery has been described as 'the most important find in Biblical archaeology for 100 years,' because it provides evidence from a non-Biblical source that another detail recorded in the Bible is accurate. One single name written and recorded in our Bibles has been shown to be a real person with a position of responsibility in King Nebuchadnezzar's court, just as the Bible said.

Relevance to our lives

There is plenty of other archaeological evidence to support the Bible records and no one has come up with archaeological evidence to prove the Bible wrong. It can be trusted and has stood the test of time, even in the face of sceptics who have spent their efforts in trying to prove that the Biblical record is untrue.

And if the historical records are true then we have no reason to doubt that other things in the Bible are true – the teaching of the coming kingdom of God on earth with all the wonderful blessing of peace and righteousness spreading throughout the world.

Extension activities

- A visit to the British museum would be very helpful if you could arrange it.
- Students could search on the internet for the names of some of these artefacts to learn more.
- Get the students to do some research about the Rosetta stone which enabled archaeologists to learn a whole new ancient language rather in the way you would decipher a code.